

The Church Potluck

Acts 2:1-13, I Corinthians 12:4-13

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 11 May 2008

Pentecost

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I love the church.

I love the Church with a big “C” — as in the church universal.

I love the church with the “UCC” — as in the United Church of Christ.

And I love the church with a little “C” — the local church — as in First Congregational Church of Minnesota.

And today I want to tell you why I love the church.

Now at the risk of this sound like a sales pitch,

I want to speak to you not as a minister selling her wares

but as a person, who in a few minutes,

will formally join this church,

and make a promise to love and serve within and alongside this congregation.

Now if you look around,

we are a pretty diverse group of people,

at least in terms of ages and backgrounds and interests and vocations.

There’s a good chance that many of us wouldn’t even know each other,

if we didn’t gather here on Sunday mornings.

And so that’s why one of my favorite questions to ask people is,

What drew you to this church?

Or what do you like about church?

As you might imagine, the answers run the gamut —

community,

shared values,

music,

a place where my kids can feel at home,

a place where I think with others about my faith,

a place where I can encounter God.

What rings true in these answers from others,

is a theme that rings true for me,

and something I have to come to believe is absolutely true,

That we are not meant to live this life alone.

And we are not meant to live this faith alone.

There are a lot of things church is for me.

And when I say “church” I don’t mean so much a place,

as I mean an event and a community.

For me, church is wherever and whenever this community gathers,

on a Sunday morning for sure,

but also in book groups,

in meetings,

in San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala
or one-on-one over a lunch table.
For me church is support,
so that when I am confused or lonely or lost
there are other people with whom I can share my burdens.
Church is also story-telling,
where I tell people about who I am and where I've been,
where I hear the stories of others
and hear ancient stories about people who have come before me.
Church is worship,
where I sing songs,
pray prayers,
sit in silence,
and thank and praise God.
Church is discernment,
where I come with my questions about who God is and who we are,
where I hold up the newspaper with its stories of cyclones, elections, foreclosures
and wrestle with issues like justice and race and poverty
and wonder what I am to do as a person of faith.
Church is proclamation
So that here together we envision, with God, a world of peace and justice,
And we share that good news with each other and with the world.

But more than anything,
more than all of these,
Church helps me find meaning in and for my life.

It is here, in this place, with all of you,
that my story becomes more than just one life of one person in Minnesota.
It is here that my life is put into the great trajectory of all time,
where my story becomes part of God's overarching story of creation,
which has been going since before I was born and will continue after I die.
It is here where I realize that the world is much bigger than just me,
that what happens to you and
what happens to our brothers and sisters in Myanmar, in Iraq, in the Sudan,
has bearing on me and our community and our faith.
It is here that I can proclaim through song and word and deed,
that God is not done with the world yet, or with me yet.

And it is here where I hear I am so deeply loved.
And it is here where I hear that I have gifts, great gifts, to give to the community and the world.

So what is it, that makes Church all of these things?
What enables our gathering, our worshiping, our proclamation?
What makes church different from a support group,
or a discernment group,
or a nonprofit working for justice?

The author of Acts writes:
"When the day of Pentecost had come,
they were all together in one place.
And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,

and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.
Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them
and a tongue rested on each of them.
All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages
as the Spirit gave them ability."

Truth be told, there was nothing much special about these apostles,
except that they were gathered in one place.
And then the Holy Spirit came among them,
and moved in them,
so that they found new ways to relate to each other
and to the people in their world.
The Spirit brought them together,
gave them words that they didn't know they had,
moving them beyond their own abilities,
creating unity in the midst of diversity.
creating something out of next to nothing.

Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Corinthians, saying,
"There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit,
and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord,
and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates them all in everyone.
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

It was the Spirit that brought them together,
That helped them worship and proclaim.

Certainly we here at First Church can have shared values,
and common visions,
but it seems there is something much deeper moving in us,
bringing us together as a community,
and equipping us to be the church in the world.

I'm reminded of a lesson I learned from one of my seminary roommates, Elizabeth.
There were eight of us who shared a house together for two years.
We lived communally,
sharing chores, food, and meals, but it was Elizabeth who had a real knack in the kitchen.
As you might imagine with eight grad students,
Food was sometimes a scarcity.
We were on a tight budget,
So the first few days after grocery shopping, life was pretty good.
We could enjoy an orange, a banana, lots of deli meat, eggs...
But as the week wore on, the cupboard would begin to go bare.
And by the weekend, that's when we'd send it Elizabeth.

She had a gift. She'd forage around the cabinets and refrigerator,
come out with a can of pinto beans,
A half-eaten bag of baby carrots,
Some spinach in the back of the freezer
Some Bisquick
And the dregs of the milk carton
And before long would have rustled up some Mexican-Italian pot pie,

which was absolutely delicious and somehow managed to feed all of us.

And the lesson was not lost on me.

For in all the churches I've been part of, I continually experience the truth
That what we bring to the table,
The Spirit uses
For the good of all.

Despite our diverse backgrounds and our differing passions,
Despite the fact that sometimes we may not like our own ingredients or those of others,
The Spirit still uses them to make us a community
And to make us as witness for God in the world.

For who we are here in this community is a microcosm of how we live in the world.
Through the Holy Spirit, here we practice love,
and forgiveness,
and truth-telling,
and grace
and compromise
and how to share our gifts for the common good.
And it magnifies out from here.

Just as we individually have our own gifts, so does First Church have its gifts.
Our leadership in being Open and Affirming, in supporting Marriage Equality,
is a gift to the United Church of Christ,
that when paired with the gifts of other UCC churches,
make this a great denomination.

And the UCC has its gifts,
it's radical hospitality, it demands for justice,
that when paired with deep tradition of the Roman Catholic Church,
and the spirit-filled preaching of the Black Pentecostal Church
make the church universal a wonderful and enriching institution.

And the church universal has its gifts,
like a deep sense of God and a message of reconciliation for the world,
that when paired with a Jewish understanding of God's provision,
or the Buddhist reverence for nature,
offers the world a sense that life is precious and valuable and full of hope.

It's the Spirit that enables it all.

And so this is why I love the Church—in all its manifestations.

And this is why in a few minutes, as a new member,
I will promise, with the help of God,
to share in the life and ministry of this congregation.

So I will go ahead and ante up my pinto beans,
trusting that someone else has got the carrots
and someone else the frozen spinach

And together we'll throw them into the meal that's already cooking here.

But be warned, the flavors of this place will change,
Because in a few minutes, our church changes, whether we like it or not.

And that's where I give thanks for the Holy Spirit.
Because whatever gifts are added today,
We can rest assured a good meal will be served
for this community and for the world at large. Amen.