

The Dignity of Tupperware

October 3, 2021

Some of the most memorable meals of my life were part of a tradition my friends and I started in our 30s. On the weekend before Thanksgiving, we would host Twisted Thanksgiving. The idea was that many of us were caught up in obligations on the actual holiday that did not spark joy; some even induced dread.

Whether it was because we would have to engage with difficult family members, or because holiday gatherings would bring into vivid relief that a loved one had died or people were estranged, the Twisted Thanksgiving tradition wasn't laden with expectations, and therefore could simply be fun. The "Twisted" part of the day was that everyone was to bring a traditional Thanksgiving food with a twist. Some of the best twists were turkey mole and balsamic roasted sweet potatoes with roasted pecans.

Some of the dishes sounded better than they turned out, including the savory sage French toast that was supposed to be a twist on stuffing and the mashed potato cookies that even the dog wouldn't eat. And, as tends to happen in human systems, this gathering that was supposed to flaunt getting rigidly locked into the same old same old, developed a tradition of its own. My best friend brought cranberry margaritas as her twist on a Thanksgiving recipe the first year, and that was always her assignment for years to come.

But even more than the camaraderie and the lightness of this pre-holiday celebration with our family of choice, three of our Twisted Thanksgiving celebrations stand out in relief. I think it was the third or fourth year that we were holding Twisted Thanksgiving that we learned, as we were all arriving for the meal, that one of our friend's teenage nieces had gone missing while taking an icy plunge in Lake Michigan. We had been starting to set the table when we heard this news, and as the dread set in, none of us could stomach the idea of feasting.

With a pall hanging over the group, instead of sitting down to dinner together, we transferred the food into storage containers and took it with us as we drove to become a part of the search and rescue crew. Let me tell you, friends, turkey curry never tastes better than out of a Chinese food container sitting next to the mother of a teen who was hospitalized, but was alive.

A couple of years later, our Twisted Thanksgiving was a little smaller, as one of our core group was deployed in Afghanistan. At the end of the night, as we were putting food away, we decided to freeze all of the leftovers so we could enjoy them with him when he returned from service the following month, to help him to know that he was with us in spirit, even if he wasn't physically present.

And, just a year after that, we once again deployed the Tupperware when his wife gave birth the day before Thanksgiving and the baby needed to stay in the hospital an extra couple of days. Again, spicy cranberry salsa in a washed out deli container, placed on a makeshift Ladies' Home Journal placemat, is the height of celebration when friends need to know that they're not alone.

All three of these evenings were sacred. All three of them were full of grace. All three of them were Communion. In looking back, what I see is that, much more than a beautifully set table, much more than an impeccably planned menu, the situation can make a meal sacred.

Today, our Worship Ministry and Visitation Ministry are launching a new opportunity: when our visitation ministers go out on their visits, they will have the option of bringing Communion with them. Because the United Church of Christ is a covenantal church, not a credal church, our theology of Communion is not highly proscribed. That means that some of you carry with you the spirituality you learned that the bread and juice are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Others of you believe that what is sacred is the act of commemorating Jesus' life and sacrifice. Yet others believe that breaking bread in Jesus' name in community is where the depth of this sacrament lies.

Because we come from a breadth of traditions, we're going to have a wide variety of understandings of Communion. What I hope we can all agree on is that, Communion is particularly meaningful when we experience that what had been lost is now found, that those who had been excluded are now included, that those who hadn't had a seat — whether because of being unable to get to church or because of being LGBTQ or because of some other block — realize that they're not only welcome at this feast of love, they're cherished and their presence is celebrated.

Like the memorable Twisted Thanksgivings I described, I hope we can agree that another thing that Communion communicates to us is that we won't forget you. That's why we imbed the prayers of the people amidst our Communion liturgy; so that we are conscious of those who aren't with us, conscious of those who are struggling and rejoicing. They're with us, too, at this table. And, I hope we agree that in Communion, we celebrate that we're not alone. In Communion, this community, the wider Christian church, and Jesus himself promise that we will never have to walk alone.

What makes breaking bread together sacred isn't necessarily fine china and fancy food. What makes Communion sacred isn't a chalice or this building, or a minister saying the right words. This meal is sacred because of the unity with Christ and with one another that it engenders.

The winter that we learned that my dad's cancer had metastasized, I met him and my brother at Culver's every Friday for lunch. Now, this may be heresy here in Wisconsin, but I really don't care much for Culver's custard. But, let me tell you, I have never tried to make a dessert last longer than those dishes of soft serve...

Meals are sacred, not because of their content, but because of what they communicate. Our plan for Visitation Communion is, like in our Gospel today when the disciples gather up all of the leftover loaves and fishes, that each month we will place several extra packets on the Communion table. These packets and a prayer guide will then be available from the church office to our Visitation Ministers, and indeed to anyone who would like to bring Communion to someone else. We hope that through this ministry, in extending the reach of this table, we will also be agents of extending its grace. Thank you for your prayers for those who aren't able to be with us, and for all of the ways you carry Jesus' blessing and love to all of the tables of your lives.

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1 Thessalonians 5:11-18, Mark 5:33-44
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