Salad for Ordinary Time

May 30, 2021

Our Pentecost Party last week was a wonderful gathering to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. The bonfire, hotdogs, s’mores, bubbles, kites – and a rare sunny day sandwiched between two rainy ones – were the perfect ingredients for fellowship and catching up. It was all enjoyable, although flying the kites was a bit challenging. Depending on the type of kite, there was either too much or not enough wind. I didn’t see any kites in trees, but there were a few Charlie Brown moments, like when I was trying to help Si get his stunt kite up, only to have it plummet down on my head and threaten to tangle me in its multiple lines. But all-in-all it was what you might call a ‘red-letter day’. I say this because you no doubt will recall that red was the color of the day. The Christian calendar uses different colors to mark the various seasons of the church. If we’re paying attention, we even remember to match the cloth on the pulpit to the color of the season. Purple for Advent and Lent; white for Christmas and Easter; black for the end of Maundy Thursday through the end of Holy Saturday. But for one day only in our Presbyterian calendar, the day of Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, the liturgical color is red. Ryan even encouraged us last Sunday to be ‘liturgically fashionable’ and wear red.

Now we have entered a period in the church year called Ordinary Time and it is marked by green. It starts the day after Pentecost, which was last Monday, and continues up to the first Sunday in Advent, which this year begins on November 28th. If you’re wondering why then is the pulpit cloth not green, well, there are two exceptions: Trinity Sunday, which is today, and the last Sunday before Advent, which is Christ the King Sunday. On those two days the color on the pulpit is white. But they fall during the long stretch of Ordinary Time. One of my devotional books says that *“Ordinary” doesn’t mean boring or second-rate but simply “everyday”. With all the big holidays and celebrations over, Ordinary Time offers us the space to find our place in God’s story, to take in the gospel and allow it to shape our daily living…to consider all the implications of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ for our day by day, week-in, week-out lives.* Be it big or small, we each have a part to play; and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are each called to seek where God is calling us to play our part in our week-in, week-out lives.

Our scripture reading today is just such a passage to help us find our place in God’s story. The letter is written to Hebrew people, mid-to-late first-century Jews who believed in Jesus. We are not told the identity of the writer, but we do know that the Hebrew recipients had long endured terrible times of suffering and intense persecution. The letter may have been penned during Nero’s rule in Rome, when Christians were routinely tortured to death. Tradition says that Peter and Paul both perished in that persecution. One commentary I read describes this letter more as a sermon and calls the author the ‘Preacher’ and has this to say about its theme: “*The preacher is addressing a real and urgent pastoral problem, one that seems astonishingly contemporary. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak, attendance is down at church, and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”* ([Thomas Long](https://amzn.to/2OhDaFh), Interpretation pg. 3) Does any of this hit home for you? We’re tired, too. Tired of empty seats. Tired of being stretched thin. Tired of expectations. Tired of Covid-19. Tired of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (well, fill in the blank). Just to name a few.

But the Preacher goes on to give passionate warnings and instruction throughout this letter to encourage the Hebrews – and us – not to drop the rope and drift away. Or, remembering last week’s kites, not to pull our string free from the hands of the flyer. We are exhorted to remember that Jesus Christ is Lord and superior over everything; to remember that his sacrifice, unlike the former temple system of repeated sacrifices, was once-for-all. We just sang about that. Listen again to verse 1 of “The Church’s One Foundation”: *The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord – she is his new creation, by water and the word – from heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride – with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.* This brings us to the ‘Therefore’ or ‘so what’ that begins our passage: so if Jesus is our perfect sacrifice and our high priest before God, and we can now approach God with bold confidence as those forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ, then what is our place, week-in and week-out, in God’s story?

The answer? Let us whip up a church salad. Listen again to verses 22-25:

*22 Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Did the ‘let us’ commands catch your ear this time? They caught mine earlier this week. I even had a silly little phrase going through my head, “Let us eat Lettuce”. Some of you are planting gardens and maybe lettuce is one of the things you will grow. But I bet you plant other things, too. Eating fresh lettuce you grow yourself might be a treat at first, but after awhile you would be looking for something else to add to your salad. Or, say you go to Brew Co and order a salad made with the fresh greens they grow. But if the salad they bring to your table only has lettuce, even a mix of several kinds of lettuce – you’re likely to be let down by that lettuce. (Unless they serve it topped with Lizzie’s special bleu cheese dressing.) However you build your salad, you probably want to add some variety – some crunch, some color, some sauce! Onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, croutons, nuts! Cheese! Bacon! Maybe even make it a meal with some chicken tenders or blackened halibut! And don’t forget Lizzie’s dressing, if you’re lucky enough to have some! Now, being the church is something like making a salad—a ‘church salad’ that will nourish us through Ordinary Time. And the writer of Hebrews has something to say about that. He gave that great ‘therefore’ summary to remind the church of our position in Christ and what that means. So now, here we are in the salad bowl. But Hebrews shows that in order to have a healthy and vital and flavorful church salad, there are some other ingredients we need to add to our ‘lett-uce’. And note that these are essential nutrients, not just empty fillers.

First, let us add the ingredient of drawing near. God has drawn close to us, and wants us to draw close to him, which he has made it possible for us to do. Under the old covenant only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and only one time a year. But now, having given us a new heart and Spirit through Jesus Christ, God has established a loving relationship with us, clearing the way for us to draw near, just as he has drawn near to us. And, we have the Holy Spirit who binds us together and helps us draw near.

Next, let us add the ingredient of *holding* *unswervingly* to the hope we profess.  What a powerful way to describe how we are to hold on to hope! Other translations say to hold fast, don’t waver, stay on track. As noted earlier, the Hebrews seem to have been at risk of drifting away from their faith. Perhaps the Preacher is picturing a strong cord connecting us to the faithful promises of God – a Holy Spirit cord connecting the church to Jesus Christ, the Author and Source of our hope. Hold tight, he says; keep a firm grip on Jesus, the one who gives us hope.

Then, let us add the ingredient of considering how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. One of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to stir us up – but here we see that we also have a part in stirring or prodding each other to do love and good deeds. And when we stir others, and they stir us, the Spirit is at work among us and in this way we also draw close to God and each other! We’ve seen this at work in our women’s prayer group. The more we share our joys and struggles, the more we are able to be supportive and speak into each other’s lives. This ‘us together’ thing takes time and effort, but with a big dash of humility stirred in, we can build stronger relationships.

But there is more to consider… how do we encourage one another not to give up meeting together? Let’s face it – there are times when we don’t want to meet or don’t feel like worshiping. The pandemic has certainly made it easier to drift away and do our own thing. Or a sunny day outside can seem better than being with the bunch that shows up on Sundays. Most of us don’t like confrontation. But if we take this ingredient seriously, we are being exhorted to reach out, to keep track of each other and ask what causes folks to stay away from fellowship. Here again, we must proceed humbly, mindful that we are in the presence of God, who knows our hearts, cleanses our consciences, and gives us his grace.

So there is our church salad. We can settle for a bland, one-note salad with no taste. We can even get out of the bowl and risk becoming wilted and shriveled. Or, we can thrive on the variety of people who come and go in our lives, bringing flavor to churches wherever they go. The ingredients may change, but in Jesus Christ, we have everything we need to be healthy, vital and full of flavor. We have the grace of God the Father, who is powerfully at work to draw us ever closer to him. And, we have the Holy Spirit, who is like that special sauce or dressing that binds us to Jesus and to one another and encourages us along the way.