

Ribbed cranberry sauce from a tin can.

...Why?

I have a friend who judges Thanksgiving Day success by how little of significance is ultimately accomplished. No cleanup (that waits until the day after). No deep conversations. No politics, religion. No sports, even. Absolutely nothing of any seriousness at all besides eating. Well, to be fair, she is also quite concerned about the initial appearance of her hospitality; as in, upon arrival, she ushers her guests through her house and immediately points out her choice of just the right tablecloths, the right plates for the platter, her most festive of napkins, and, of course, her most opulent, yet un-edible, dessert. As she understands it, Thanksgiving is a day where she can and ought to retreat from the world, wine and dine with her closest friends and family, engaging in what amounts to an incestuous delight of hedonistic ingestion, devouring everything in sight, well, everything except that undignified ribbed cranberry sauce that her crazy aunt still insists on bringing. But outside of that regrettable addition, the rest of the table and indeed the day better look good and behave well, and require as little effort as possible.

Sound like anyone you know? Your family? ...how about our church family? I mean, is it just me, or are we sometimes kind of like my friend, the hedonistic host?

I find that I am composed of two parts. And sometimes, one part of me, if honest and candid, feels we are a bit more like the Chestnut Hill Country Club than the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. A private club where we can retreat from the outside world occupying ourselves only with each other's company, rather than say those who are visiting, or who are strangers out on the avenue. I mean, we culminate a serious hour of worship by enjoying *high* coffee, discussing all matters of our lives that have absolutely nothing to do with the significance of the hour previously spent, and we do so in our little circles of familiarity. Moreover, we dress up coffee hour such that we have the best cookies and Danish delivered not from the ovens of our own homes but from Bredenbeck's. And Lord forbid if anything ever looks less than excellent or slightly out of place. Lord forbid if that ribbed tin can were ever to be found here at ChesPres. And so we go on and hire professional companies to do the flowers outside, because we must keep up appearances. And so we offer wine and cheese at every occasion, no matter the event or gravity of the cause, because we think why else would anyone come? And so we go on resorting even to gambling over cocktails, playing Texas Hold'em Poker to fundraise for our summer youth mission trip...

I don't know, my friends. But this part of me kind of thinks that Ezekiel has us pinned. Namely, that we are the fat sheep. Gluttons for our own interests, accomplishing little in the way of substance, ingesting as much as we can such that only the scraps get sent off to the shelters.

Now, the other part of me celebrates just how much we do get right here. Even with visible bumps and observable bruises, we are yet family. Moreover, we are a beacon for the arts and an epicenter of community especially down in the Center. We are annual sponsors for countless organizations whose collective purpose is to promote welfare for the needy and justice for the silenced. All of this, and much more, is absolutely true of our ministry. Absolutely.

And so considering of all of our good and hard work, I think we sometimes wonder, are we really not entitled to enjoy some of the gifts ourselves, even just for a little; the music and the pageantry, the cookies and the drapery? Or must we always have to think first of those who have less? I mean Jesus has got to be just a little reasonable, right?

“Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you? Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

- Matthew 25:44-45

Hmm... maybe not so reasonable. But, I'll try.

Yes, I do believe we can take care of the “least of these” without also sacrificing everything ourselves. After all, if we did sacrifice *everything*, then we too would become the least of these, and someone would then have to take care of us and our starving children, and our children’s starving children, and the cycle would never end. So, no, we probably don’t need to upend our lifestyle so completely (though a little more certainly wouldn’t hurt), such that we have nothing left on our tables besides that which was given by others.

But, I do think we need to amend and qualify what it means to take care of our other. And I think it starts by pivoting from thinking that all of our mission partner’s needs can be easily remedied by simply writing a check from our leftovers. For even if we write a larger check at that, how much actual effort does that really require? Honestly, a simple stroke of the pen seems as little effort as possible. So no, I think Jesus is imploring us to do something more. Namely, to leave behind the comforts of our houses, our circles, our tables, surrounded by the familiar faces of friends and family, and to go to outer most fringes – the hospitals, the prisons, the streets -- to listen and to share, and not just our stuff, but also and mainly our lives. For it is only there, in fellowship with our other, that we will truly take care of and encounter the anointed.

This past Sunday the youth group went to afternoon worship at West Kensington Ministry. We have been there several times before, and each time it’s been different. Last Sunday was no exception. Adan, their pastor, called it a “Service of Sharing.” Which meant that anyone from the crowd would be able to come forward and share their story, in addition to their interpretation of the scriptural text.

And so after the hymns ended a man named John shimmied forward. His clothes were dirty and worn. He had tattoos up and down his arms and legs, and several on his neck and one on his face. He spoke with a stammer, or perhaps a drunken stupor. His sermon was a rambling mess of largely disconnected ideas, but they all had a central focus if you listened hard enough: forgiveness. And so he shared his story for us. His biological father left his mother before he was born. Another man moved in some years later. This man physically abused John, once throwing him through a wall in a fit of anger, and on another occasion kicked his head so hard it spilled into a bloody pool on the floor. He also exposed John to cocaine at the age of six. *Six*. And so, John began using at the age of 10. *Ten*. His sister, some years later, was fatally stabbed in front of him, her torso disemboweled in front of his own eyes. He fell into a long depression and his habits only worsened. He was homeless then for some time after and did every hard drug you could fathom. The only solace he found was in the art of his graffiti. And it was there and then, in that illicit twilight and unimaginable depression, that the revelation of God miraculously descended upon him. Through the scattered, disparate molecules of paint, he was somehow able to spray a constellation and find purpose. He began reading scripture, front to back

and back to front, such that he is now able to rattle off passages by memory at will. Ultimately, he came to believe that God had forgiven him for all of his crimes and thus, it was now his turn to forgive others, even if that also meant himself and his enemies, most principally his father-figure. And it was through that unfathomable event of grace, redemption, and charity that the gospel of Christ became fully realized and his life forever changed.

Honestly, while I was listening to his story, I couldn't help but see the presence of the Anointed One. In this kicked tin can of a human being, broken, disheveled, ribbed, and discarded, the essence of the gospel was made real to me. More real, dare I say, than it is often made here amongst the par-excellence.

And when he was done sharing his story, he began to dance. And when he was done dancing, he began to pray. And when he was done praying, he began to fellowship with each of us. Shaking our hands and inquiring into our own stories. And he listened with such intent, with such earnest, that it was as if every word we spoke about our own, unimaginably different, privileged, affluent lives, was yet of equal importance and relevance to his own. John... the least of these... anything but.

Most simply and obviously stated, this experience would have never have happened if we also never showed up. If we just wrote another check from afar. It was only through fellowship, face-to-face fellowship, that we were able to encounter John, his story, and indeed the presence of the risen Christ still working in the world and miraculously at that.

And isn't this all so wonderful then, you must be thinking! How great that the youth were able to go to West Kensington and have this experience with John *there*... but... what if John walked into *here*. Dressed like he was, talking like he was, dancing like he was... what then would we do? Would we divert our eyes and shake our heads? Would we ask Owinier to kindly escort him out to the streets? Would then we end up like that Methodist church in Malibu, who just this past week stopped serving meals to the homeless because the town decried it was "luring too many of the needy." Or would we be the good host, or better yet, the good servant, inviting John in to share our pews, our worship, and even our table, coffee, and cookies?

My friends, today is Christ the King Sunday. And unlike every other king who would rather hobnob with the elite and most glorious of society at the most decadent of tables, this King of kings opens his banquet hall in the back alley way of the grimeiest neighborhood, sending out invitations to crackheads, outcasts, and sinners. And on and around his banquet table is not the choicest of wines and silverware, but I'd wager some discarded, unwanted, undignified ribbed fruit. And until we come to terms with that. Until we begin to see what we really matters in this faith called to action. Until we begin to widen our eyes and open our arms to the sick, the incarcerated, and the downtrodden, we will forever remain blind to the truth and the power of the gospel.

Oh sure, we could have some really fun dinners and events, excellent shows and concerts in our ignorance. Sure, we could even be the most entertaining country club in town.

But we will also never be the church.