

## “Get in Line”

John Dominic Crossan defines the essence of Jesus’ ministry this way: heal the sick, eat with them, announce the kingdom. When I first heard Crossan say this last week, I said to myself, “finally a Biblical scholar saying that we need to have more potluck suppers.”

In case you didn’t know I love potluck suppers. I used to think that the word potluck was adapted from the first nation’s word potlatch; but it actually has its origin in England. In the 16th century a wealthy traveller might ask the innkeeper what there was to eat, and be told ‘chicken’, or ‘beef’ etc., and choose it. The poorer traveller might have to do with ‘pot luck’, a stew of whatever was left over from the fare of the last few days or weeks. Having usually been boiled many times over, it was safe enough, and often tasty, though its nutritional value was often low. The quality of what was in the pot depended on your luck.

In all my years of ministry I had one cardinal rule for myself at potluck suppers. Always be the last one in line. A couple of reasons for this. The first is theological. As the servant of the servants of God, I felt I should eat last. It’s in the Bible. “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink?’” (Luke 17:7-8 NRSV)

A second reason for this is pastoral. If one of the dishes seems to be ignored then I take a giant helping and make sure that I find out who made the dish and tell them how wonderful it was. There is nothing worse than bringing something to a potluck supper and having to take it home again. So being last in line is an opportunity for healing.

Now this ‘being last’ served me well until I was minister to the Okanagan Japanese congregation. I went to my first potluck supper and my eyes popped open. I had never seen so much sushi, sashimi and rice in my life. I said the blessing and then waited. No one moved. Then slowly all eyes turned in my direction and soon everyone was looking at me. Finally, noticing my obvious discomfort, one of the congregation, (who was used to Caucasians) said to me, “The minister always goes first.”

Peter was in an uncomfortable position. Jesus had just finished asking his companions, “Who do people say that I am?” They had said he was a prophet and then named them all from Elijah to John the Baptist. And then Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” All fall silent except Peter who declares, “You are the Messiah!”

Right on, we say, Peter you’ve risen to the top of the class. You know that it is about healing, eating and announcing the kingdom. Okay now onto the next lesson. The Messiah “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...” “No,” says Peter, “that can’t happen, there has to be another way.”

“Get thee behind me Satan!”

Let’s pause here a moment and explain this. The way of Satan means the way of Caesar, a way where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and that process of domination is maintained by violence. The process of healing and eating together is a non-violent subversive way of overcoming the domination system.

The statement to Peter, “get behind me”, is get behind me in this line that is on its way to Jerusalem. We are not going there to die, we are going there to announce that the kingdom has come—but—big but here—death may be the consequence.

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Paul Mullen, a United Church minister in Calgary, shared with me this story. “The scene was a church gymnasium in Los Angeles, California in 1969, the Viet Nam War was raging. The Watts Riots had happened not long before. L.A. was a crucible of sorts. I was sitting on the floor with about a hundred others, most of them seminarians who, like myself, were in process of preparing for the ministry. We were all watching intently as a large black man, with a large afro hairdo, wearing a colourful dashiki, paced back and forth in front of us, glaring at us, like a caged lion. He was a leader in the Black community in L.A. and it was quite clear that we would sit there until he decided what would happen next. To this point, having been introduced to us by our professor, he had said nothing.

And he continued to say nothing. Pacing back and forth, back and forth. It seemed like an eternity. Finally he spoke. “The problem with you white folk, the problem with you middle-class, wet behind the ears, white folk, is that you haven’t got a clue what you are willing to die for. And because you don’t know what you are willing to die for, you haven’t got a clue why you are alive!” He went on to say more, much more, but that is all I needed to hear. He was exactly right, and I knew it. At that point in my life it was true for me and it was undoubtedly true for most of those seated there. It was also true for me that I began to understand that picking up one’s cross has a lot more to do with what you are willing to die for than with carrying a burden of suffering.”

Joseph Ton was pastor of a Baptist church in Rumania while Communists ruled that country. The authorities hated him because of his preaching. They arrested him, and threatened to kill him. Ton said to the arresting officer: “Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, ‘I’d better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.’ They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. I will win the supreme victory then.”

The officer sent him home. Ton says: “That gave me pause. For years I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive. I had accepted all the restrictions the authorities put on me because I wanted to live. Now I wanted to die, and they wouldn’t oblige.

Now I could do whatever I wanted in Rumania. For years I wanted to save my life, and I was losing it. Now that I wanted to lose it, I was winning it.”

There is a message here for the church in decline, and the United Church is a church in decline. It is very easy to fall into the trap of trying to save our church—even our dreams of a new church. We want to make sure the pews are comfortable and the music inspiring. We want church to be a nice place with no arguments or difficulties, a place where our gifts are valued and we are not burdened with too much to do—a spiritual oasis like a summer vacation.

That is precisely what will kill us. Without the cross there is no church. This doesn’t mean that we go out looking for suffering or discomfort. Taking up the cross means accepting the way God has for us, accepting the hand we have been dealt, and be about healing, eating and announcing the way of God.

It does not mean that we must die for our faith, but it does mean that we must be willing to do exactly that—to die for our faith. It does not mean that we will be called on to die for our faith. It does mean that we be ready if we are.

Clarence Jordan, author of the “Cotton Patch Gospels” and founder of the inter racial Koinonia farm in Georgia, was getting a red carpet tour of another minister’s church. With pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple.

“That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars,” the minister said with a satisfied smile. “You got cheated,” said Jordan. “In the time of Jesus, Christians could get them for free.”

The kingdom of God is like a cosmic potluck supper, and in that line are the poor, the lame, the blind—all those that society casts off. And in that line, the poor are made rich, for all benefit from the earth’s bounty, for in that line “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” And the lame are healed, for when we walk arm in arm all can make the journey. And the blind can see, for all can see others in the line as brothers and sisters, one family, one children of God.

And only one question remains, “what do you have to lose, so you won’t lose your place in the line?” Take up your cross, get in line, the journey has begun.