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July 17, 2016
Luke 6:12-16

“Food for the Journey: Community”

It’s hard to resist a good church potluck, especially if you’ve been to a few before and know what to expect. There are the salads: potato, pasta, fruit, green, and Jello. It’s tempting to fill a plate with these salads alone, but then there wouldn’t be room for the crunchy-topped casseroles, the deviled eggs, corn bread, baked beans, or fried chicken.

In the general course of things, all of this food probably shouldn’t be eaten together, but at a potluck, caution is thrown to the wind. The corn bread soaks up a bit of the dressing from the salads it’s resting on, the fried chicken gets a little soggy from the baked bean juice, and only the deviled egg remains unscathed from the conglomeration of food found within that nine inch circle. Everything gets mixed and mashed together, and the blending of flavors is unique, unexpected, and sometimes downright delicious.

The potluck meal, this quintessential church gathering, is an apt metaphor for our “Food for the Journey” topic today: Community. Just like the food we bring to the meal, each of us is different, unique. There can be three potato salads on the buffet, but each one can differ slightly, from the cut of the potatoes, to the type mayonnaise used, or any other variation.

Communities are a gathering of diverse individuals around a common purpose. Our individuality means something in community, which is why Paul gives us the body of Christ image in I Corinthians. We find communities in all shapes and sizes. Some are virtual—found only through social networking or on the internet. Others have been in existence for decades, centuries even, with the membership rotating through the years. A community can be as small as a handful of people or as large as a mega-church. The topic of community is as broad as our old oak tree, and there are as many different facets of community as there are limbs on the tree. To narrow our focus, let’s turn to Jesus in the gospel of Luke.

Luke 6:12-16. Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this passage, Jesus is forming his community. The group of individuals who will work most closely with him, who will get to know him like no one else, and who will carry on his message after his death.

The first thing Jesus does is call all of his disciples together. At this point, Jesus has been preaching, teaching, healing, performing miracles, and upsetting Pharisees in the region of Galilee. He already has a crowd of followers surrounding him. He’s also already called a few of them by name to be his official disciples—the fishermen Peter, James, and John.

At this point, though, Jesus is intentional to choose twelve disciples, also named apostles. He doesn’t simply scan the crowd looking for raised hands. No, Jesus spends the night in prayer on the mountain, signaling what an important decision this is. He names 12 apostles to match the 12 tribes of Israel.

Think about the purpose of those twelve tribes. Primarily, a tribe was your lineage, it sometimes helped determine your occupation like the Levites who served in the temple. Being part of a tribe helped others to place you; your tribe often determined where you lived.

But with Jesus, it's not the tribe that matters. His ministry isn't fixed geographically, ethnically, or socio-economically. Jesus doesn't choose "the best and the brightest." He doesn't look at resumes, conduct lengthy interviews asking, "What's your five-year plan for bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth?" Jesus seeks the will of his Father in his choices. He seeks to know the hearts of the ones he is calling, because the job he has for them is no ordinary job.

These disciples are Jesus' followers, sure, but they are much more than that. They are apostles—ones who are sent out. In his *Feasting on the Gospels* essay on today's passage, Keith Erickson says, "We are invited to follow the apostles as Jesus not only lays claim to their lives, but also empowers them to serve God and humanity. Jesus calls followers to an active participation in God's mission." They are not passive bystanders to Jesus' ministry but participants who are enacting the kingdom.

Have you ever stopped to think about how you ended up at Guilford Park? We ask our new members what drew them here and there are a variety of answers. The warmth of their welcome, the music, and Jeff's articles in the paper are just a few of the answers we get. But underneath all of those answers is the fact that God has called us all here. We may not have received the summons in the same way the first disciples did, but it is no accident that each of us is here. Even our visitors here today have been called whether this will be their permanent worshiping home or not.

This community, Christian communities, are different than other communities. We are different because we have been assembled together by God, for the purpose of worshiping and serving. We come together with Jesus in our midst, and share in the gifts he has given us. He gives us gifts of grace, mercy, forgiveness, love, and challenge. We give those gifts to each other. Jesus welcomed outsiders, outcasts, and the unclean. We welcome them too. We are sisters and brothers in Christ, heirs to the promise, bearers of the kingdom.

In his book about Christian community *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer names forgiveness as one of the keys to life together. He says, "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner."

Community seems especially important today. It's important because the old-fashioned connectedness of community is slipping away even though we are more "connected" than ever. We, who are on this spiritual journey, need the food of community to sustain us, to change us, and to change our world. We are not in this life alone; we are in it together. Jesus sent his apostles out into the world to continue his ministry and spread his message.

And though those apostles are long gone, Jesus still has us. We are to continue the work of preaching, teaching, challenging, loving, and forgiving. Do you remember how powerful it was when the Amish community that was victim of a school shooting in Pennsylvania in 2006 forgave their shooter? They could do that because of their faith in Christ and the support of their community.

How do we use our community to change lives and the world? How do we reach out to the broken people and places? One person at a time. One conversation at a time.

Writer and Presbyterian Ann Lamott shares in her classic book *Traveling Mercies* why she makes her then 8 year-old son, Sam, go to church, even when none of his friends went. Sam was born into St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California. She says, "For instance, the father was not that enthusiastic about my having a baby, and I had no money. But I'd been going to this little church for a while by then, and when I announced during worship that I was pregnant, people cheered. All these old people, raised in fundamentalist houses in the Deep South, cheered. It was so amazing. They almost immediately saw me as the incubator who was going to bring them a new baby, to have and to hold. So they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought furniture, they brought

me soul-food casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that he was going to be a part of this family. And they began slipping me money.”

One woman, Mary Williams, would always bring Anne a small bag of dimes. She started when Sam was first born and Anne was broke. But even when their financial situation changed for the good, Mary, who didn't have any extra herself, continued to bring Anne bags of dimes. This is their community. This is where they find Jesus, sitting in the back of the church praying, carrying a bag full of dimes, each one a token of grace.