

Call to worship

Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself. – Rumi

Sermon

As we move into the Holiday Season, I start to think more about shared meals. Holidays often bring people together to break bread who may not see each other for the rest of the year, or even longer. And the many-seated table filled with favorite dishes and wine acts as a symbol of fellowship and community. “Everyone is welcome at my table,” I hear people say. I’ve said similar. It’s a beautiful sentiment and thought. That I might set my table and fill it with food, and *anyone* who shows us can eat and drink. That we might create a small, diverse community from all walks of life, congenially gathering around the shared human need of sustenance and conversation.

Of course, the reality doesn’t always line up with the expectation. Shared meals can be fraught, anxiety-producing, or awkward. Conversations can turn ugly. People can feel unwelcome, despite the hosts best intentions. I know when *I* am a guest, shared meals can even be frightening. I think I’ve mentioned this before, but I have a severe allergy to certain nuts. Anaphylaxis, epi-pen, emergency room, that whole thing. I don’t know how to explain to people who didn’t grow up reading and re-reading ingredient labels how it feels to regularly fear your food could kill you. To regularly fear that the people feeding you could kill you. It’s something I don’t think you can really *get* unless you’ve lived it. But I’m grateful that awareness of severe food allergies has come a long way in the past few decades. Now people at least usually understand the severity of the allergy, and believe that it’s a real thing. That wasn’t always the case, believe it or not.

In the 90s and 00s, awareness of severe food allergies was not what it is today. When I was a teenager and young adult, I went to so many dinners and parties where I just couldn’t eat anything. Sometimes the hosts would say, “Oh yeah, I forgot you were allergic. But don’t worry, I don’t think there’s any nuts in anything.” Keyword *think*. Frequently my next question would be “Is there any peanut butter in anything?” and they’d go “Oh yeah, there’s peanut butter in the soup and the cookies.” *eyeroll*

Another favorite phrase was, “Can’t you pick around it?” There’s some walnuts in the salad, but can’t you pick around them? Well, no, since if I eat something that was touching the nuts it will have the same result. But I didn’t want to be anti-social, so I would continue to go to dinners and parties that were dangerous to me.

I remember one time in my twenties I went home with a friend for Thanksgiving. I let them know about my allergies, but they explained to me that their thanksgiving dinner always included a turkey stuffed with walnut stuffing, cranberry sauce with walnuts, and a desert of

pecan pie. This was their family tradition, they told me. They didn't feel right asking their parents to change it for me. They said I could just "eat around" the deadly recipes. And there would be some things I could eat, after all. Mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, dinner rolls.

I remember sitting at that table, everyone enjoying the cornucopia, and my plate empty except for a dinner roll. The gravy and turkey were off-limits, as they were tainted by the stuffing. I looked longingly at the mashed potatoes and green bean casserole, but then my eyes would dart to the serving spoons, which were shared between dishes. If someone had used the stuffing spoon for the casserole, and I ate the casserole, my Thanksgiving could end in the emergency room. I grit my teeth and took a second dinner roll.

When my friends' parents noticed I wasn't eating anything except bread, they asked what was up. "I'm allergic to nuts," I said. They pointed to all the things that didn't have nuts in them, but that were nonetheless contaminated. Then one of them started talking about the no-carb diet they were on, and how hard it is to stick to. As if that was the same thing as a deadly allergy.

The stress alone took almost all of the fun out of the event. And I certainly didn't feel welcomed by the hosts, despite the big "Welcome" they gave me at the door. In fact, after awhile, I started to feel resentful and isolated.

This was by no means an isolated event. I went to many dinners like this before I started drawing more protective boundaries for myself. Awareness of severe food allergies has increased a great deal in the past 20 years, but I'm still wary. Years of experiences like the one I described has ingrained deep caution in me around shared meals.

Nowadays I know many people understand the severity of food allergies. Most of you would probably never dream of telling me to "pick around" the peanuts in a dish you served me.

But I wonder, what elements of our BAUUC community are we expecting visitors to "pick around?"

Oh, it's tradition! We might say. It's always been like this here! We have good intentions!

Well, that walnut stuffing was tradition. That family had always had it. And they had good intentions by inviting me to share it with them. The reality just happened to be that I wound up feeling isolated and only ate dinner rolls for my thanksgiving meal.

Now, that family could have made me *feel* welcome by changing their recipe to make sure the food was safe. But for them, their traditions were more important than my safety. So I never went back.

And, we might also offer grace. After all, food allergies weren't as widely understood back then. They were acting out of ignorance, not merely insensitivity. I truly hope that that family is now more aware of food allergies, and if they have had more nut-allergic guests for Thanksgiving,

that they've altered their recipes accordingly. Maybe then their guests will truly feel welcome, and they have a chance to become actual friends.

I've heard from so many UU churches that they don't understand why they can't seem to "diversify." They've set the table! The "All Are Welcome" sign is at the door. But the seats continue to be filled with the same people, and if visitors from different backgrounds *do* show up, they often don't return. Again, I ask, what are we asking our guests to "pick around" in order to be at our table? What traditions, ways of doing things, and assumptions do we expect them to adhere to, even if they may be hurtful to them, or make them feel ostracized?

Austin Channing Brown writes "White American churches remain far from experiencing anything resembling reconciliation. **The white church considers power its birthright rather than its curse.** And so, rather than seeking reconciliation, they stage moment of racial harmony that don't challenge the status quo. They organize worship services where the choir of two racially different churches sing together, where a pastor of a different race preaches a couple times a year, where they celebrate MLK but don't acknowledge current racial injustices. Acts like these can create beautiful moments of harmony and goodwill, but since they don't change the underlying power structure at the organization, it would be misleading to call them acts of reconciliation. Even worse, when they're not paired with greater change, diversity efforts can have the opposite of their intended effect. They keep the church feeling good, innocent, maybe even progressive, all the while preserving the roots of injustice."

"A great many people believe that reconciliation boils down to dialogue: a conference on race, a lecture, a moving sermon about diversity. But dialogue is productive toward reconciliation only when it leads to action—when it inverts power and pursues justice for those who are most marginalized. Unfortunately, most 'reconciliation conversations' spend most of their time teaching white people about racism. In too many churches and organizations, listening to the hurt and pain of people of color is the end of the road, rather than the beginning."

To extend my imperfect metaphor, it would be as if I educated that family about food allergies, and they *understood* the severity of my situation. But then what they did about it was invite me over to the very same nut-laden meal to tell me about how well they understood my food allergy.

You can set the table and open the door, but if you won't change anything about what you're doing, even if it hurts others, don't be surprised when you find your table filled only with people very much like yourself.

If I invite you to a party, but only I make all the rules, then you will only ever be a guest in my house. If I want a reciprocal, beloved friendship with you—if I want us to truly be *in community*—then we must BOTH build something together, and we both must have power and agency in the creation.

As Ada Limon asked, “What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain for the safety of others.”

That is a picture of Beloved Community. A table where we do not cling so tightly to our traditions and comforts that we cannot change so that new friends may feel truly welcome. That we may have the openness, curiosity, and humor to listen and learn, and then to act on what we have learned. That we may have the wisdom to change ourselves to welcome the community we envision. That we may hold the words of Rumi in our hearts as we move forward.

“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.”

I admit that I remain a little clever. I believe that we may still change the world. And I also believe that we cannot hope to change the world if we do not first change our own behavior. My friends, I hope you will join me in changing some of our old recipes to create a more welcoming table. Only then will we have the chance to truly create a beloved community.

May it be so, Amen