

March 29, 2020

Going Inward: Grammy Can't Cook

Rev. Curran Reichert for First Congregational Church Sonoma, CA

*Everyone knows the kitchen is a place where our meals are prepped, cooked, and served. However, there are some of us who consider it as a classroom for learning some of life's most insightful and thought-provoking lessons.
Johnny Tan, From My Mama's Kitchen*

Church people like to eat. I learned that as kid spending at least one night a week in the basement of Redland's First Baptist Church. Potlucks were a way of life for churchgoing folk. I'll bet a number of you have a casserole or Tupperware dishes with your name taped to the bottom of it, or if you forgot to give it back, you have a container with somebody else's name on the bottom. Potlucks are a way of life for church people.

My mom has been a church lady her whole life. She learned her way around a kitchen at an early age because her parents worked at Patton State Mental Hospital on swing shift, so she was in charge of getting her two younger brothers to and from school, bathed and fed.

In her late teens Betty Crocker's cookbook was the unofficial bible and the red and white checkered "Joy of Cooking" required reading for anyone intent on attracting a husband. My mom memorized them both, and according to family lore, won my father's heart through his stomach.

It wasn't long before her two small children wanted birthday cakes in the shape of sharks or princesses, so she studied layering and icing, and achieved cake decorating skills that made her the mistress of ceremonies for countless fancy occasions. My favorite cake was snoopy holding a tennis racket- very seventies.

In that era Gourmet Magazine was popular amongst white, middle class American housewives and it was about that time that my father's company, based out of Richmond Virginia, began to expect home entertainment as part of the hospitality extended to out of town associates. My mother, never one to underestimate the power of a delicious rib roast, rose to the occasion too many times to count. Yessir, a dinner invitation to the Reichert's was a thing of beauty.

That is still the case, though my parents are now both retired. Everything important happens in my mama's kitchen or around her dinner table. That is until very recently.

On February 20, 2020 my mother called me on my cell phone- I was actually in a cooking store, in this case the apple didn't fall far from the tree. She uttered those words a child never wants to hear, "Don't panic dear, but we are in the emergency room."

My father was admitted for what would become an exhausting four-week ordeal to heal from what was determined a very dangerous bacterial infection in his leg. As anyone who has ever endured any time in the hospital will empathize, it was an emotional roller coaster. One moment it looked like everything would be fine and we were filled with elation, only to be cast into a deep emotional abyss when things suddenly turned sideways. That happened over and over again.

My mother spent an average of eight hours a day at my father's side, most of the time trying to track the ever-changing situation before finally collapsing in a heap at home each night. In my more than fifty years of living I have never seen my mother avoid going into her kitchen, never known her to eat take out so many nights in a row, but such was the case during our month of crisis. Over bleary eyes one night she looked at the kitchen that was and would again one day be her sanctuary- and said, "Honey, I just can't cook."

I was pretty sure that if I ever heard those words out of my mother's mouth the end of the world would not be far behind. I wasn't too far wrong. Covid-19 arrived in time to drive the fear of God even deeper into my families psyche with the first reported death in the state of California happening right upstairs from where my father was being treated at Sutter Hospital in Santa Rosa. Then the game began deciding whether to visit for fear of infection and to make matters worse, I got called up for Federal Jury Duty.

Here is what I found amazing, just after the nation had been put on notice to refrain from gatherings over fifty and encouraged to stay six feet apart; over one hundred potential jurors were crammed into a windowless room like sardines and asked to pass one microphone from hand to hand for

hours with no effort to sanitize. If I come down with this I virus, I definitely planning to blame the Federal government.

Now back to the kitchen, the Bible is obsessed with food metaphors;

- Psalm 34:8 “Oh, taste and see that the God is good!”
- Matthew 6:11 and 4:4 “Give us this day our daily bread.”
“But he answered, “It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

My dad came home last Saturday and like magic, my mom had a meatloaf and mashed potatoes on the table faster than most people can look up a recipe for meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Rack of lamb and rice pilaf were on deck the next day. Now, only she and my Dad can eat all that delicious food because they are quarantined for two weeks, still I am glad my mom is back in the kitchen.

I am glad we are all back in our kitchens.

Our own Mayor Harvey opened a conference call this week by extolling the virtues of homemade soup- “I just made a big ‘ol pot of soup,” he said, “it is really delicious and really grounding. Everybody should make soup.” He is totally right! Food is life and it is no mistake that God is often compared to the taste of what is good and nourishing. That’s one of the best ways I know to understand all that is Sacred- as the stuff of life, the leaven in the loaf, manna in the dessert.

Next week I will likely talk about something with a headier tone, it being Palm Sunday and all, but this week I just wanted to share from my own experience. All is not definitely not right with the world, but some things are better than they have been in a long time...

I don’t think I will ever look at a grocery clerk again without wanting to hug them for coming into work.

Yesterday, my whole family stopped to look out the window at a fat grey squirrel. Ten days ago nobody would have noticed that squirrel getting a drink out of the pond in our backyard, it was awesome.

Think about it, for the first time ever, there were too many people in parks! Some things are definitely right.

One thing we all have to do is figure out how to pace ourselves emotionally. We all know that things are likely to get a whole lot worse before they get better. But we are in it together and finding ways to create meaningful connection. All in all, I think folks are exhibiting an amazing ability to adapt. But when it all feels like more than you can bare, try making a big 'ol pot of soup- don't forget the cornbread. And hey, if there is enough to share, take some down to your neighbors, then ring the doorbell and hide behind a bush- gotta laugh, right?

All Things Pass Lao-Tzu

All things pass
A sunrise does not last all morning
All things pass
A cloudburst does not last all day
All things pass
Nor a sunset all night
All things pass
What always changes?

Earth...sky...thunder...
mountain...water
wind...fire...lake

These change
And if these do not last
Do man's visions last?
Do man's illusions?

Take things as they come. All things pass.

See ya next week.

Amen