

Lord, without Your Spirit, these words are just words. Give them life, that we may have life. Amen

We come to the end of our August series: Summer Pastimes and the Life of Faith. It was challenging to find bible passages dealing with swimming, not too hard with travel, nearly impossible with baseball – but picnics? They are all over the bible, from the meal Abram and Sarai served three angelic visitors by the oaks of Mamre, to the sustenance Elijah was given by ravens, to the picnic for 5,000 on a hillside in Galilee, to every meal on the road eaten by Jesus and his disciples, by Paul and Barnabas and all the traveling apostles. Picnics, banquets, feasts of all kinds litter the pages of our scriptures.

My favorite is the one we heard read this morning – that breakfast picnic Jesus has going on the beach after his resurrection. It takes the disciples awhile to realize that guy on the shore is Jesus, but when he calls out “Come and have breakfast,” they don’t hesitate. There’s more to the story, both before and after the breakfast, but today that’s all we’re going to focus on: Jesus making a picnic for us.

I’ve already told the story of being invited to a picnic on a beach by total strangers, how resistant I was, and how absolutely delicious the food was. There is something about eating outside, away from the ordinary, that awakens our senses. It’s like that with our spiritual lives too – learning to be alive to encounters with God outside these walls awakens our spirits, makes us available to knowing God and being known in ways that may not happen if we stay in the same, predictable patterns.

Picnics take place anywhere: on a beach, in a back yard, on a blanket laid out on a grassy field, at an outdoor concert, or wolfing down a sandwich at a bus stop. But generally they happen outside.

Church, like picnics, is meant to be lived outside.

99% of our time being church is outside of here – we can’t focus so much of our energy as Christ-followers on what happens in this building.

Just as Jesus sent his disciples out, so we are sent out –

outside the walls of churches and homes, on the road and in the streets, taking God’s love and life to wherever people are hungry for it.

Our faith gets stronger when we exercise it in new surroundings,
stretching beyond our comfort zones and comfortable communities.
I ask this every week: Who around you needs to meet God through you?

And picnics, like faith, need to be unwrapped.

They come in baskets and boxes and bags, each element neatly nested.
Watching a picnic come out of its containers is like seeing a mystery unfold –
what's in that bag? What's in that container? What does it taste like?
At its best, that's what growing in faith can be – discovering nuggets in scriptures,
learning new songs of praise, sensing God's presence in prayer or ministry,
tasting the richness of love in community.

When we start up our Learning Hour again in September, I hope you'll take part –
we'll have one called "Jesus the Game-Changer," and a book study of
Adam Hamilton's "The Call." Check out Bible Study on Wednesdays.

Find a rhythm of daily prayer and listening to God; try on a ministry.
Some of us read *Water Daily*; at Night Prayers we hear it together,
and have a brief discussion about what we've heard.

It's not so much the activity as the spirit we bring to it: if we cultivate a spirit of
exploration and expectation, expecting to be surprised by God, we will be.

Because that's another thing about picnic: they don't just happen –
someone needs to plan and prepare them.

So our faith lives require some preparation and intention
if we're to get the most out of them.

Remember those spiritual practices we explored when we did the Way of Love?
Are you still doing any of them? What might it take to refresh that practice?

How about trying out Night Prayers at 8 each weekday evening?

That's a spiritual picnic each night,
with contributions from whoever attends that evening.

Because picnics are usually shared experiences, right? And often the meal
is a combination of foods brought by different participants.

This is how we live our faith communally, in church and out,
with each person bringing the "dish" they make best,
providing their gifts in beautiful diversity to make up a picnic that is delicious
and varied, with unexpected pairings of tastes and textures and colors.

And when we bring our gifts together – including our financial gifts –
we add them to a picnic God has already prepared for us,
just like Jesus prepared that breakfast picnic in our gospel story.
Jesus calls to his disciples, weary after a night of fishing,
“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught.”
God wants us to bring our gifts to the picnic,
even if God gave us those gifts in the first place. That’s how it works.
God’s picnics are always joint efforts between us and each other, us and God –
and then us and the strangers we may find ourselves sharing food with.
One day we will approach that heavenly shore, our time on this earth done,
and I think we will hear Jesus saying,
“Come and have breakfast. I’ve made a picnic for you.”

That picnic begins now, at this table, and is repeated as we take this
bread and wine out to share with the rest of the world.
That’s how my friend Mary Lynn described eucharist:
“You give us this little piece of bread, and then we take it out and give it away
all week, and then come back for more.”
God’s picnic is already going – what are you going to bring?
What are you going to eat? What are you going to share?

Amen.

John 21:9-14

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.