

***“Not Bread Alone”***  
***First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto***  
***A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon***  
***on 11 October 2015***

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

A little over three years ago I attended St. Lydia’s for the first time. It’s what’s called an “emergent church,” and the liturgy is based on the house congregations of the early Church. Eating dinner together is central to the worship experience. St. Lydia’s is located in Gowanus, Brooklyn, not far from where I used to live.

I came across the place entirely by accident. A musician friend from San Francisco asked if I wanted to come with him one evening in July to check it out. All he told me was that the music was great, and there’d be food.

When we arrived, I felt immediately welcomed. I made a nametag for myself, and someone put me to work setting the tables. Once worship began I noticed that I enjoyed the music, which had simple melodies and was beautiful. Towards the beginning of worship we formed one big circle around the tables. That was great. I’m a fan of forming circles and looking at each other in worship.

But then it occurred to me that we were preparing for a Communion ritual. Oh. Internally I got smaller. Um, I didn’t sign up for *this*! I panicked. What had Mark gotten me into? I looked over to him--a self-identified Unitarian Universalist from a remote logging area in Northern California with an eclectic spirituality to say the least--but he didn’t seem concerned about what was coming next. So I closed my eyes and breathed and followed the instructions to raise my hands for the Eucharistic prayer, “as was the custom in the early Church.” After the prayer ended, and the bread got passed around, I became anxious. When it was my turn, first I was served and then I turned to the person next to me, trembling, as I broke off a tiny piece of bread and said, “So-and-so, *this* is my body.”

Wow, was I being triggered. Raised Catholic, attempting to take Communion forced me to confront my own sinful nature. I could never just take it freely. I always had to ask myself beforehand when I'd last been to confession or to Mass. There always seemed to be something standing between me and participating in the ritual. *Between me and God*. The takeaway message over and over again was that I wasn't worthy and therefore had to be excluded from this holy sacrament. I simply wasn't welcome.

But that day at St. Lydia's I didn't feel judged. No one asked me about my religious background or whether I were Lutheran or Anglican (the two denominations St. Lydia's is affiliated with). No one seemed to care about my theology either. Apparently I could believe what I wanted and still be accepted. There was no checklist to see if I qualified to take Communion. Plus the bread was delicious!

What I discovered and learned to cherish most of all at St. Lydia's was the lived experience of community. This gets expressed in the liturgy, which is both intimate and highly participatory. Even though my friend moved away, I continued attending and eventually joined the congregation and took on different roles in worship. There was something special about St. Lydia's, and I loved the idea of eating and worshiping at the same time.

Food and faith have a long tradition. All major religions incorporate food into their worship. In Judaism there's the fall harvest festival of Sukkot and the Passover Seder. Hindus and Sikhs regularly make food offerings to their deities. Muslims fast for 30 days for Ramadan and celebrate the end of the holy month with the huge communal meal Eid al-Fitr. Most Christians celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist regularly. It's hardly surprising that the ancient Greek word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to Communion as the "joyful sacrament."

Even outside the religious context there's something inherently spiritual about gathering people around food. As Peter Block points out in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, food "brings the sacred into the room. It is the symbol of hospitality. It is as direct as we can be about a life-giving act."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Block, *Community* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008) 148.

Those of you who are cooks will know this, and many people preparing a Thanksgiving meal will likely experience it too. Feeding people can be nourishing and healing. If we're lucky, we'll receive as much as we give in the process.

I don't know how many of you have volunteered in soup kitchens before. I have a fair amount of experience cooking and serving meals to the hungry. The first soup kitchen I ever volunteered in was called Not Bread Alone, which is based in Western Massachusetts. One of the things I'll never forget about volunteering there was the chance to sit down and eat with the clients once we were done preparing the meal. There was something transformative for me in getting to know the men and hearing their stories. I learned so much from them and their lives as I let them into my heart.

In her beautiful little book about Communion as spiritual practice, *The Sacred Meal*, Nora Gallagher talks about having had a similar experience at a soup kitchen at her Anglican church in Santa Barbara, California. She writes: "I began to understand what Jesus had done when he sat down with outcasts. For an hour, I became an outcast myself."<sup>2</sup> She compares this to taking Communion. Just as Jesus worshipped with the most marginalized in society, so they in the soup kitchen were creating something sacred and full of abundance by sharing in a meal with the homeless. This can be really scary, though. As Lonni Collins Pratt and Father Daniel Homan point out, radical hospitality "requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me... You can't ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing."<sup>3</sup> Radical because *we're* changed too.

Gallagher asks whether we can imagine a new story regarding Communion than the one we grew up with or learned somewhere.<sup>4</sup> What would this look and feel like for us as Unitarian Universalists? What does our radical welcome table entail? Guided by our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we regularly practice standing on the side of love in courageous ways by compassionately supporting the rights of the

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<sup>2</sup> Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009) 114.

<sup>3</sup> Lonni Collins Pratt and Father Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011) 55.

<sup>4</sup> Gallagher, 73.

marginalized and the oppressed. In our repeated calls for justice and greater diversity, it seems clear that we want everyone to be welcome at the Table in our ongoing striving to create the Beloved Community. Our welcoming of the stranger to the Table is noble and beautiful, and I don't want to critique it here. So many churches cause irrevocable harm and suffering through their efforts to exclude those they consider unworthy of God's love. I'd like to think that we're better.

Instead this morning what I'd like to have you reflect on, as we get ready to celebrate a harvest communion of bread and apple cider together, is what is sacred to you in this community? What are you most thankful for? As you eat the bread and drink some cider, what will you be taking in? What do you most hunger for? What about this community most makes you come alive?

I want to propose that we make a celebration today of our own worthiness to receive grace. Sometimes as UU's we become almost entirely fixated on acknowledging and demanding that *others* be treated as worthy without turning our gaze inward first. It's interesting to ponder our own sense of worthiness to participate fully in community/Communion. What gets lost when we feel shut out, silenced, or shut down? Sometimes others have this effect on us, and sometimes we diminish our own self-worth. In contrast, we remember so vividly those times when a fellow congregant or friend stopped to just listen, accompanied us through a painful time of heartbreak and loss, made us feel seen and appreciated.

Nora Gallagher imagines Communion without any requirements—like my experiences at St. Lydia's. She explains how she tries “to bring [her] whole self to the table. All the good stuff and the bad. Everything.”<sup>5</sup> What if we strived to bring our whole selves to our community and felt safe enough to make ourselves vulnerable and expose some of the parts of ourselves we're ashamed of and have split off? I was so inspired by last week's member testimony, in which a congregant risked sharing his truth and started tearing up. That took real courage and exposed the depth of his relationship to Toronto First. Gallagher reminds us that Communion is all about the body

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<sup>5</sup> Gallagher, 93.

and ingesting spirit.<sup>6</sup> Dare this morning to bring your body and heart with you to the Table.

By welcoming our whole selves and embracing our own brokenness, including the stranger within, we might get a deeper taste of what is most sacred. Let us welcome the grace of an open heart—first and foremost our own. I hope today you will take in this message that you are enough, and you too are welcome at the Table. You won't be turned away here.

Welcome!!

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<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, 13.