

May 1, 2022 | Third Sunday of Easter
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON
Open, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say,
'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'
(Matthew 11.19)

I am going to tell you three stories. All of them factual. None are even embellished.

FIRST STORY. A couple of months ago, when meeting with new comers to Old South Church, a young woman asked a question:

What do I need to do to receive communion at this church? The answer: You need only be hungry for God.

I don't need to be a member? she asked. No, came the reply. You need only be hungry for God.

I haven't even been baptized yet, she continued. No matter. You need only be hungry for God.

SECOND STORY. Just a few Sundays ago, immediately following Festival Worship a man, a passerby, having stepped in from the street, entered the narthex. Identifying me by my robe, he approached asking for the Eucharist.

Oh, I said, our services are over. Really sorry.

He, rather insistent, said: *But I need it.*

I said: *Follow me.*

We snaked our way through the Chapel during Fellowship Hour, climbed the steps into the Crawford Library and entered the kitchen. I pulled open the frig door and took out a jug of grape juice and a hunk of challah bread. I poured the grape juice into a pottery chalice and placed the bread on a pottery paten. I asked him his name. Daniel it was. I prayed over the elements and, there in the kitchen, just the two of us, I offered to Daniel the bread and cup of Christ's communion table.

The bread of heaven broken for you, Daniel. The cup of salvation poured out for you, Daniel.

Daniel crossed himself and partook.

After partaking, Daniel looked at me and said: *I needed that. I needed it badly. Thank you.* And, with that, he was gone.

There are many Christians out there, many churches -- maybe the majority -- who would denounce such sacramental generosity as irresponsible; as theologically negligent; as slipshod, overly casual.

There are a great many churches which practice Closed Communion, meaning that the sacrament is reserved for members of that denomination...or in some cases, only members of that church, or in other cases, only members who are *also* and simultaneously “properly disposed,” and who have “sufficient knowledge and careful preparation.”

At Old South Church in Boston, by contrast, we practice Open Communion. (Closed Communion and Open Communion are actual ecclesiastical terms. You can look them up on Wikipedia.) We practice Open Communion at Old South Church because, as it turns out, Jesus was sloppy, extravagant, and calculatingly generous with his invitations to the table: to the meals, suppers, and picnics he was forever planning and hosting.

He never put a thought about who would be seated next to whom. He drove the disciples crazy with his lax and unconventional ideas about dinner parties. All he wanted was for everybody to gather, to be at the table, and share food and conversation.

And so, there's a lot of eating that goes on in the New Testament, all of it centered around Jesus, to the point that some even think it somewhat scandalous. In fact, those offended by Jesus' hosting of suppers accused him of being “a glutton and a drunkard”. (Luke 7.34 | Matthew 11.19) He wasn't either of those.

What Jesus was, was a masterful host. An ebullient conversationalist. An exquisite story teller. He was possessed of a marvelous sense of humor. In his presence, you felt welcome, wanted, noticed, and cherished. He brought people together and, oh, the meals! Fresh bread torn from a warm loaf and dipped in oil, the passing of a jug of wine, fish grilled over an open fire, ripe olives and succulent figs, not to mention the songs, the stories, the hearty greetings, the hale: Welcome in! Pull up a chair! Here's a plate! Have some wine!

The feasting that happened around Jesus – that happened *because* of Jesus – was glorious and convivial. You wanted to be there.

And so it was that the earliest symbol for Jesus wasn't the cross. It wasn't the dreaded symbol of execution; of Rome's horrific display of the stone, cold power of empire. No, the earliest symbol used by Jesus' earliest followers was an emblem of the meals to which they were so often treated, and by which they would remember him. The earliest symbol for Jesus was a fish. It was two arched lines, meeting at the front to conjure the face of a fish. And those same arched lines crossed at the end to conjure a fish's tail. The fish symbolized the miracle of the loaves and fishes: the miracle in which Jesus produced enough to feed 5000 people,

and, also, the miracle of the great catch, and, not least, the time the risen Jesus prepared breakfast for his fishermen disciples by grilling fish over a fire at the lakeshore.

FINAL STORY. On Wednesday, July 30, 2003 at Boston's Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Sean Patrick O'Malley was being installed as Bishop. I was there as an invited guest. The Cathedral was packed to the gills that day: over 2,500 people in attendance.

Among the invited guests were a lot of Boston politicians and a host of Catholic religious leaders including, as the Boston Globe reported the following day: 500 priests, 25 Bishops, and two Cardinals. Off to the side, assigned seats in a section of one of the transepts, sat a small clutch of ecumenical clergy. Here were the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, the Lutheran Bishop of New England and, two ordained women: the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, and ... yours truly. I was there in my capacity, at the time, as the leader of the largest Protestant denomination in the Commonwealth: the United Church of Christ.

Sitting there, tucked into the transept, a very long way from the chancel, I thumbed through the program for the Installation. Reading ahead, I noted that the instructions concerning communion were clear as a bell. The instructions stated that access to Eucharistic communion was reserved for baptized Catholics. In other words, the ecumenical delegation, of which I was a part, was not invited to the table.

However, lest the ecumenical delegation had failed to read ahead – lest we had somehow failed to register that the table was not open to us – when it came time for communion, ten Catholic seminarians from St. John's Seminary in Brighton – ten strapping young men, as I remember them, all in clerical collars and black suits – formed a phalanx, placing themselves between us, the ecumenical delegation, and the communion table.

They served as the ecclesiastical equivalent of football's offensive line: their job was to protect the bread and cup by blocking our path to God's table of grace. To stretch the metaphor (and you know I will): the purpose of the formation was to protect the passing of the elements to baptized Catholics, while preventing the rest of us from intercepting them.

Sitting together, side by side, the only two ordained women in that packed sanctuary, banned from the table of grace, we put our heads together. We whispered conspiratorially. We strategized. We fantasized. Should we make a break for it? (Here's where you might cue the theme song to *Rocky*.) We imagined hurtling our bodies through the formation of strapping seminarians, charging up the Chancel steps, heroically snatching a wafer from the priest's hand, and taking a slug from the sacred chalice.

We imagined it. Oh, did we imagined it. We would not have done it. But we imagined it.

In our defense, it was Jesus – sloppy with his invitations and hopeless with seating assignments – who put such ideas into our heads.