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What Love Tastes Like

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What does love taste like? - I bet you weren't expecting that question this morning - What does love taste like? Since we are all unique individuals with our own different preferences and experiences, I suspect the answers will all be as different and individual as we all are.

For me, love tastes like chicken noodle soup. Now, I know that as a priest I am supposed to answer this question differently, with something more theological sounding, like Holy Communion. And I'll get there. But for me, the best place to start with reflecting on the question of what love tastes like is chicken noodle soup. And this is why.

Several years ago, when I was serving my first parish, St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Sussex, WI, one of many Milwaukee suburbs, I lived in an apartment complex. Now, this also happens to be where I met my husband and his daughter, but this particular event took place before Michael and Hailey took much notice of me. At this point in time, I was just another resident to them, hardly worth paying attention to, like all the other folks who lived in that building. How that changed is a story for another time.

One summer, there was a terrible rainstorm, one that managed to dump torrents of rain in a short period of time, resulting in massive flooding. The church basement was flooded so bad the water was up to my knees. But that was nothing compared to the flooding at my apartment complex. The parking lots were all flooded, I couldn't get from the road to the building I lived in. The underground parking flooded too, with up to 8 feet of water, which was disastrous for any vehicles parked in there. The underground parking is also where the water heaters for the building were located, and because of this, the management demanded that all residents evacuate for safety. So, as the rain poured down once again during this big storm, I called the church sextant who helped me carry my two cats in their carriers and a small overnight bag through the pouring rain to my car, which I had parked at the church parking lot a few blocks away. It wasn't the first time I had gotten drenched that day; it was the third time. It was the first for my cats, who were definitely not happy.

I loaded my cats into my car and drove to the only place I knew we would be welcomed, fed, and taken care of: my parent's house 2 hours away. On the way I called my mom and said, we were wet, we were bedraggled, we were evacuated, and we were

coming home. While the rain stopped about a half hour out of town, I was still not completely dry when I arrived at my parent's house two hours later, even though I'd had the heat blasting all the way there.

When I got out of the car, I was met by my sister and brother, who helped me carry my cats and things into the house. They had heard about the storm on TV and were worried about me. I was exhausted. My mom told me to get out of my wet clothes and she'd take care of my cats, whose moods had not improved during the two-hour drive. To this day it is hard to believe how cold I felt even though it was summer time, so after I had changed into dry, warm pajamas, I came out to the kitchen table where my mom served me a bowl of hot chicken noodle soup. And I am telling all of you that was the most delicious soup I have ever tasted.

It was NOT made from scratch. I think it was made from a bag of soup mix. When I called, my mom had looked around for something to make for me to eat when I got there, and that soup was what she chose. That soup was so delicious not because it was organic, nor made from scratch, nor had some secret ingredient; it was so delicious because that soup was made in love, it was what one person could do for someone they love who had nowhere else to go. That soup was welcome, comfort, peace, nourishment, care.... All the stuff of love. Which means that soup, as common, ordinary, plain, boring, as it might appear to anyone else, to me was the very embodiment of love. It was my first encounter since the storm started building as black clouds in the sky that told me everything was going to be okay, eventually. It was the food I needed to relax my tense muscles and worried spirit, so I could rest for a night. And it was the supportive encouragement those who love me have always given me, so I could get back into my car early the next morning, drive back to a flood damaged church building and apartment building, and deal with whatever I was going to have to deal with. That soup was evidence that while I would leave the safety and comfort of my parents' home the next morning, I was loved, and that meant I wasn't alone and whatever I had to face, I could. And that is why for me, chicken noodle soup will always remind me of that day, that love, that connection to my family, which is not ordinary; it is something God has seen and blessed, which makes it holy.

Today's Gospel is all about such food that tastes of love, the love of God. Today we are still in the midst of Jesus' very long discourse to the large crowd of people who were part of the 5000 plus fed with bread and fish in John's Gospel. Jesus is still talking about being the Bread of Life, the bread that came down from heaven, and the people in the crowd are still not sure what to make of such a claim. In fact, we heard they complained about what Jesus said.

Their complaining might bring to mind the Exodus story. And that may be some of what the author of John wants us to remember, the complaining of God's people in the wilderness as part of their long journey to liberation. After God answered the prayers of God's people and liberated them from slavery under Egypt, where they had encountered amazing miracles, as soon as the celebration ended, they started to complain. Especially when they got hungry. Or thirsty. Or tired. The complaining also has a theological tone to it; as scholars tell us these complaints can be interpreted as a way of rejecting God, or Jesus, until God or Jesus prove themselves to the people adequately by giving the people what they want to see. It's a way of trying to get God to be what they want God to be instead of letting God be who God is.

This seems to be at the heart of the complaint of the crowd in today's Gospel because they were complaining about Jesus, specifically that there seems to be nothing special about him. They know him. They know his family. He is like one of them. Which means he seems to be as ordinary as a package of soup mix. How can someone so ordinary claim to be from heaven or the bread that gives life?

It's a complaint I often hear – or at least variations of it- from people today. Especially when they tell me they don't want to bother God with their prayers or problems because they tell me, "God has better things to do than deal with their ordinary or small or boring issues." One of the ideas about God Jesus came to destroy is the idea that God is some disengaged corporate CEO sitting behind some pristine desk on a cloud somewhere high above it all afraid to get God's hands dirty dealing with day to day ordinary business because God is concerned with bigger, more important issues. The Incarnation is all about how wrong that notion is. As God Incarnate, Jesus shows us just the opposite, that God does notice what we arrogant human beings have decided is not worthy or our attention because we call it ordinary. The Incarnation, however, shows that what we take for granted because we think it is ordinary, God notices, God loves, and God uses to create a connection between God and those God loves: you and me and all people.

The church has a word for that: sacrament. A sacrament is something physical and most often very ordinary: things like bread and wine and water, that God touches through the Holy Spirit and makes it a way of connecting us with God. Like water in Baptist and the bread and wine in Holy Communion. These official church sacraments need a bishop or a priest to say the prayers to help us see this connection, how God participates in our worship with us, but sometimes this connection happens when a mother makes her daughter soup from a mix, and no one sees the love but that doesn't mean it is there, because I tasted it. And I would not have recognized it if I had not first tasted that same love in Holy Communion.

These sacraments aren't just for worship; their effects outlast the church service. The water of baptism is a connection to God through Jesus we have for our entire lives and even after, even if we don't feel it. And our prayers after receiving Holy Communion remind us that the small ordinary looking wafer, and sip of ordinary looking wine will give us the strength and courage we need to face whatever is ahead of us: the good, the not so good, the frightening, the exciting, and most especially the things we deem ordinary, the people and places we can so easily take for granted. Not because the wafers and wine have some magic power, but because they are an ordinary looking thing God touches and uses to connect us to God, who loves us and nourishes us with God's love.

Today's Gospel might be good reminder for us to reconsider how we look at or pay attention to what seems ordinary in our parish, community, and world. Ministries like the altar guild deal with the ordinary, the wafers, the cups and plates and linens, but are often mindful of how those things require special care because they are participants in the sacraments. Members of the altar guild often tell me how caring for the cups and plates, linens, and doing the chores of setting the altar or cleaning up after the service are ways they feel that connection to God and feel closer to God through their ministry.

What if we all saw our other ministries that way: where ordinary things like yarn, or tomatoes and lettuce, forks and spoons, coffee, lawn mowers, letters in our sign out front, dishes and the dishwasher, books in the library, compost bins, candles in the chapel, or the signs we put out, all the many tools we use to share God's love with the community, could be recognized for their part in connecting us and others with the love of God? Or the people we depend on, those we don't even know, those who deliver our food to stores or the farmers market, or who work to make sure power plants run, all those whose jobs aren't the kind that usually get noticed. Or the very world we live in, the air we breathe and water we drink, or the trees, mountains, lakes, and animals who share this world with us. What if we learned to see them all as intricate and essential parts of our connection to God and to each other? Perhaps just learning to recognize the holy in what we thought ordinary could be living one step closer to the eternal life Jesus came to bring, the resurrection life that is God's kingdom here on earth where we all know the taste of love.