

A New Recipe for Church

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, AB
February 8, 2015
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Texts: Luke 9:12-17; John 6:48-51; Psalm 34:8

Why do you come to church? There are lots of reasons, probably. But one of the main reasons is that there is something here that feeds your soul. If there was nothing here for you that fills you up, I think a lot of you might stay at home in your pajamas and watch TV. The church feeds people because it takes after Jesus. The church is sometimes called “the body of Christ”. Jesus fed a lot of hungry people: literally feeding them with the bread and fishes on the hillside like in the scripture we read today. But he fed them in other ways too. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” Jesus, in some of his last words, told Peter to “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs.” The church is called to feed people.

Today I want to talk about how the church cooks up nourishing meals for hungry people and we’ll do that by cooking something up this morning. [the sermon is preached while the soup is cooked, see end of the sermon for the recipe!]

What are we cooking today? For the longest time my favourite soup to make was Hearty Lentil Sausage Soup, *More with Less* cookbook p. 212 made with good Mennonite Farmer Sausage. It also happens to be the first soup I ever learned how to make, when I lived with some girlfriends in a house in Winnipeg in the early 1980’s. We ate that soup all the time, it was our go-to meal for guests. I continued cooking that soup so often and so regularly that I no longer needed the book, because I knew the recipe by heart. But over the years the soup changed. For example, one year my room-mate’s mother gave us 100 baggies of frozen green beans. So we always used green beans instead of parsnips. Then one time maybe ten years after I started making it, I was cooking and realized I didn’t have lentils, so I put in barley, and found I liked it better, so I always used that. Somehow the main spice changed from marjoram to basil. But there was always sausage. Nothing like Hearty Lentil sausage soup. I cooked it for 20 years.

And then one day, at a friend’s house, I was served Senegalese Curry Soup. It blew me away, it was so tasty. It instantly became my new favourite soup. It was totally different...it started with chicken, it had peanut butter and curry, and you even ate it with condiments like peanuts and green onions and coriander that you added at the table. I was wild for this soup, I started serving it every time we had company. And every time I served it, people would say, “I need to get this recipe!” It was a major soup reformation. I didn’t give Hearty

Lentil Sausage Soup a second thought. That was yesterday's soup. Recipes change over time...sometimes they change gradually, but if the circumstances are right, recipes can change dramatically.

What is the recipe for church? What do we throw in the pot when we are cooking up something for hungry people? When you came to Lendrum, what were you hungry for? The meat of the gospel, the aroma of friendship, the flavour of singing? The satisfying taste of vision and meaning, the oil of belonging? There's a certain stock, a certain order of worship, we use here that we find tasty.

I have talked to people who were here at Lendrum MB from the beginning, and they tell me things have changed a lot. But I get a sense that the flavour is similar. For one thing, Lendrum likes to throw in a healthy dose of Tabasco questioning, to spice things up. We'll make sure we add that to our soup today!

But let's look at not just what Lendrum is cooking up; what is the global church cooking up? Of course, different churches have different recipes—as wide and varied as the list of different soups in your bulletin. But the nourishing news of Jesus Christ is in every soup, however varied the recipe. Are there trends to be seen in what churches are cooking up?

There are scholars who spend their lives studying the global church, they can give us a perspective that we might miss when we are staring into our own soup bowls. Many theologians are suggesting that there is a new reformation happening, that on the whole, the recipe for church is changing in a very big way. They are saying that our tastes are changing, and God is cooking up something new. We may have been eating hearty lentil sausage soup for five hundred years, but maybe it's time for something quite different.

Why would they say that? Well, they look back to a time when there was another major recipe change, back in the 1500's with the Reformation. The Reformation was a time where many parts of the global church pitched out the old cookbook and started using a brand new recipe for church. Scholars have spent centuries asking, "Why did that recipe shift take place? What conditions allowed for such a big change?" These same scholars look at the church today, and say that similar shifts are happening now. Some of the conditions are similar...maybe it's time for a big recipe shift. People are hungry and Jesus said, "Feed my sheep, feed my lambs!"

In the 1500's the church was facing a crisis. Many people were disillusioned with the church...they saw huge amounts of money being spent on the church. Taxes from all over Europe were building a giant basilica in Rome...the church seemed out of touch with the suffering of the common people.

Today you can see a similar view...churches are sometimes wrapped up in their own affairs, building their own churchy things, worried about how they will survive. They sometimes seem out of touch with the poor and suffering people around them. Churches seem to be about church, and not about being a part of the world and its problems.

People in the 1500s were disillusioned with clergy. They looked at them and saw immorality and corruption. There was a lot of infighting and political wrangling in the church. In the 1500s there were three popes vying for power, every one saying they were the true pope. People were sick of it, it was very unappetizing.

Today research polls show that the public's opinion of clergy is much lower than it used to be. Clergy sexual abuse scandals have rocked every denomination. It used to be that wearing a clerical collar meant that people trusted you; not any more, you are just as likely to be viewed with more suspicion because of your profession. Clergy just aren't seen as being important to the health of the community as they used to be.

And importantly, in the 1500s the church was not providing the spiritual nourishment that many people needed. When people went to church in the 1500s, the priests spoke a religious language, Latin, that the common person couldn't understand. There were rituals that you participated in, but there was not enough effort made to explain the gospel to people, or to live it out. People kept going to church, it was the thing to do, but many people's hearts weren't in the service. To those feelings, add the circumstances of a revolution in communication technology. The invention of the printing press and the spread of literacy gave people opportunities to learn about the gospel outside of the regular channels of the church. A Reformation was being born. People started asking questions.

Today, when someone comes to church who has no knowledge of Christianity, how often do we use code words or religious lingo that doesn't make sense to the average person? There are rituals they can participate in, but how do they see what the gospel means...are we living it out? A communication revolution has happened in our lifetime, and now people are looking for spiritual food outside the churches in their neighbourhood.

In today's world, if the goods aren't delivered, people vote with their feet, they leave the church table and look for something more nourishing. I could quote statistics, but I don't have to. Just think of people you know or work with or live around...how many go to church and how many don't? If you're here in church on Sunday you are in a minority position in Canada. Why don't more people come to church?

The church can answer that question by saying, "Well they are all sinners and they're all going to hell." That places the blame squarely on the non-church goers. But what if the problem is not so much with the people who are hungry, but with what the church is cooking

up to serve them? What if we are continually cooking noodles for a gluten intolerant population? What if they just can't digest what we're serving? Or what if there is something in our community that is just not appetizing? As a church we should be the salt of the earth...we should serve something that people are craving.

A couple of years ago I went to a church service that was held in a movie theatre. It was a satellite congregation of a megachurch. We sat in our theatre seats, drank coffee, ate snacks, and listened to a live-broadcast sermon on the big screen. There was no offering, no hymns, no bulletin, not that much interaction between the people there, but it had a flavour of church. The thing was, the people who ran that church didn't define what was happening on Sunday morning as "church". Church happened in a network of small groups meeting in people's homes...Sunday morning was sort of like Sunday school, a learning or outreach opportunity. Community people who would never feel comfortable coming to a church building, felt much more comfortable coming to a movie theatre to watch something. There they were invited to a different type of community.

I have to say that I went to that movie theatre church with my mind made up. I was sure I hated that recipe for church. Like the first time my kids sat down and I served them Senegalese Curry Soup. "What is this stuff?" they said as they crinkled up their noses.

But as I sat in the service, I felt nourished, the flavour of Jesus Christ was unmistakable. I left there shaking my head. "My goodness," I thought, "that was surprisingly tasty!"

In the Reformation there were people who were energized to reform the church. People who said, "This is not good enough. The people are hungry! We've got to do something different." These people believed they were called by God to do some innovating in the kitchen. People like Martin Luther, or Menno Simons, George Fox, Charles Wesley and thousands of people whose names we don't know—they worked on new recipes. They read the Bible, they prayed, they listened to the hungry people, and they devoted themselves to cooking.

Today there are also people who are called by God to reform the church. People are trying out new ways of doing church, ways that are nourishing for the 21st century. While here in North America church attendance is dwindling, in the Global South, churches are bursting at the seams, they are experiencing exponential growth. Mennonite churches in Africa far outnumber Mennonite churches in North America. Going to Mennonite World Conference is a time to go and listen; to ask each other about recipes, to taste what God is cooking up around the world.

With changes in technology, for the first time in history, we can easily connect with churches around the world, we can be the body of Christ, in a more complete and full way. Will the arm listen to the elbow? Will the foot listen to the stomach? What could happen if God's

body could communicate effectively with itself? Instead of the same old flavours of parsley and mint and other home grown spices, we have options of lemon grass and saffron.

I think today there's a real hunger for something real. Churches in the past have emphasized right belief, you have to believe this and this and this, believe in this virgin birth and that view of the atonement. You have to know what virgin birth and atonement mean! In churches today that are growing, I think there is less of an emphasis on believing the right things, and more of an emphasis on living a certain way. It has a lot more to do with, "Are you following Jesus? Is Jesus making a difference in your life, in your neighbourhood?" People want to know about the relevance of Christian faith. "If Jesus can change my life, I'm on board!" If the claim is "Hearty Lentil Sausage Soup", it had better be hearty.

There's something else that needs to be talked about in this new recipe for church. It's the medium in which we live, the world that we swim in, that shapes who we are. In the 1500's the reality was that nation states were dissolving, and politically there was a great deal of turmoil. Economically the world was changing too. And with the change in politics or maybe as a result of all these changes, people's way of thinking about the world was changing. There was a renaissance in people's thinking that brought about a reformation of the recipe for doing church.

Today, in the 21st century, we live in a fairly stable political world. Nation states have been in a basic formation for quite some time. But economically the world has become global, trade has accelerated and we have a world economy, an economy that is more powerful sometimes than world politics (take for example the economic effect of a small group of people changing the price of oil!). This new economic world order can have far-reaching effects. And we have a physical world that is changing...we don't know how fast or how much it's going to change in the next 50 years, but we know there's climate change happening now. This is the medium in which we live. How will this affect the way we think about ourselves and the world? It could be revolutionary. Will it change the way we think about God? Maybe the recipe for church should change along with our changing appetites.

So back to Lendrum...I wonder what your feelings were when you read the sermon title, "A New Recipe for Church". I am guessing that some of you had a grumpy face, at least on the inside. You're thinking, "I like this recipe for church just fine! Everyone likes this recipe, why do we have to change it?" This recipe may be working for the group of people we have here. If our mission was only to feed the people who are here right now, we might not have to change very much. The gospel story tells us that Jesus said, "Feed my sheep, and feed my lambs." Does God care only about the people who are in the church now? Or do we offer good news for people everywhere? How can we make a soup that will appeal to hungry people?

Aid workers who work with starving children have a challenge getting food into the hungry stomachs, food that can be digested and absorbed. Dietitians working with aid workers in Africa have developed something called "Plumpy'Nut". It's a peanut based paste made of milk powder and oil and vitamins that is easy to digest, and has all the calories and nutrients that a severely malnourished child needs. Intravenous feeding works on starving children...but there simply aren't the resources to admit all the starving children into hospitals. Because Plumpy'Nut is in a plastic package, it doesn't have to be refrigerated, it can be sent home with parents for their starving children. Around the world, desperately skinny little children are gaining weight with Plumpy'Nut. It is saving them!

That's the sort of thing we are looking for in the church, a Plumpy'Nut recipe for church that meets the needs of hungry people. It might be that literally feeding people is the answer. Maybe that's the first step to feeding people's souls. What recipe do we need for the Word of God today in Edmonton?

Sometimes churches catch fire, they suddenly taste a new soup, and off they go with a new recipe. That's great. But lots of churches gradually change their recipe for being church. Like my experience with Hearty Lentil Sausage Soup over twenty years...add something here, take something away there. In ten years, what will the recipe we are cooking up be like?

Who is in charge of the recipe for church here at Lendrum? Suppose this half the church decided that we are using the "Hearty Lentil Sausage Soup" recipe for church, and they come and put the ingredients in the congregation soup pot. And meanwhile the other half of the church is determined to make "Senegalese Curry Soup", and they put the ingredients in the congregation soup pot. What do you get? You get a terrible mishmash of flavours that no one wants to eat! Churches fall apart because they all are determined that their recipe, and only their recipe is best!

The secret to success is realizing that it is not our soup! It is God's soup. It's not just, "What do we want to eat?" it's "What is God cooking up for the 21st century?" That requires humility on our part, that we don't have all the answers. That requires cooking with an open mind, not hanging on to the past for dear life. Jesus is on the menu...but what does that mean? We need to be in tune with God by listening to our hearts, listening to each other. Cooking up church is not straightforward, it's not written in stone. It's experimental, it's fluid. What are we cooking up today? What's this soup called? Borscht or tom yum? Mulligatawny or minestrone, lagman or cock-a-leekie? Pho, or ramen, snert or fufu, goulash or gumbo...?

The challenge for us as a community here at Lendrum is to be committed to cooking together, committed to feeding hungry people. We will pray, we will listen, and we will read scripture. We'll talk to hungry people, and try out some changes to our recipe. We must talk to each other about soup, dream about soup together. Maybe there are some ancient

recipes we need to dig up. We have to go to other churches and try their soups, and come back and tell soup stories.

As we work together in the kitchen, our minds are fixed not just on our own hungry bellies, but on the hungry people in our neighbourhood, in our city. When we're thinking on those lines, that's exactly when we get the call from God, who says, "Guess who's coming to dinner?"

Let's pray:

God of grace, you invite us to your table filled with food. Thank you for letting us have a turn at the stove. Help us here at Lendrum to cook up something nourishing for our community. Give us wisdom as we work together and keep our eyes and hearts open to the hungry people, your people, who we meet every day. Amen.

Creole Catfish Stew

In a stock pot, sauté for 5 minutes

4 tbsp cooking oil

2 onions, chopped

4 ribs of celery, cut into ½ - inch strips

2 green peppers, cut into ½ - inch chunks

Add to the sautéed ingredients and cook 30 seconds.

2 tsp thyme

1 tsp oregano

1 tsp dry mustard

1 tsp Tabasco sauce

1 tsp fresh ground black pepper

2 tsp salt

Add to sautéed ingredients, let it reduce a bit.

1 cup dry white wine

Add to sautéed ingredients.

3 ½ cups pureed tomatoes

6 cups chicken stock

2 cups baby lima beans

2 cups corn

Add to sautéed ingredients, and simmer until cooked and the flavours have developed.

2 pounds catfish fillets, cut into 1 ½ - inch pieces

2 tbsp fresh parsley

What soup is your favourite?

- Borscht - (Russian) beet and veal soup
- Bourou-Bourou – A vegetable and pasta soup from the island of Corfu, Greece.
- Caldo verde - A Portuguese minced cabbage soup
- Cazuela – a South American soup with a clear broth, rice, potato, squash, pumpkin & meat.
- Cock-a-leekie - Leek and potato soup made with chicken stock, from Scotland.
- Cullen Skink - A Scottish fish soup made with smoked haddock, potatoes, onions & cream.
- Fufu - A traditional Nigerian soup with vegetables, meat, fish, and ground melon seed balls.
- Gazpacho – A Spanish pureed tomato and vegetable soup.
- Goulash soup - A Hungarian soup with beef, pork, paprika, peppers, tomato, potato, onion.
- Gumbo - A traditional Creole soup from the American South, thickened with okra pods.
- Íslensk Kjötsúpa - Traditional Icelandic meat soup made with lamb and vegetables.
- Kharcho - A Georgian soup of lamb, rice, vegetables and a highly spiced bouillon.
- Kimchi jjigae – A Korean kimchi (pickled vegetable) stew.
- Lagman - A traditional Uzbek soup of pasta, vegetables, ground lamb and numerous spices.
- Menudo - A Mexican soup with tripe, calf's feet, chillies, hominy and seasonings.
- Minestrone - An Italian vegetable soup, with noodles.
- Mulligatawny – An Indian soup with meat, vegetables and curry.
- Pozole – A Mexican soup with meat, hominy, onion, garlic, dried chillies and cilantro.
- Phở - A Vietnamese beef/chicken soup with scallion, Welsh onion, ginger, wild coriander, basil, cinnamon, star anise, cloves and black cardamom.
- Ramen – A Japanese soup made from flavourful broth, spaghetti-like noodles, various meats like pork or lobster, onion and other various herbs (miso), and sometimes even corn
- Rivel - A Pennsylvania Dutch chicken soup with flour and egg mixed in
- Snert - A thick pea soup from the Netherlands, traditionally served with sliced sausage.
- Shchav - a sorrel soup in Polish, Russian and Yiddish cuisines.
- Tinola – a broth popular in the Philippines made with pieces of chicken and green papayas.
- Tom Yum - Thai soup with lemongrass and coconut milk.
- Żurek - A Polish wheat soup with sausages often served in a bowl made of bread.