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Wednesday Community Ministry Suppers

Dianne Borch

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Introductory Note: For many years various community groups such as Scouts, AA, Al-Anon, the Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association, and various theatre, music, and other organizations have been meeting at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Kitchener, Ontario. Located close to a hospital, a high school, a hockey arena, and a withdrawal management centre, the church three years ago began a neighbourhood outreach ministry that includes a Wednesday potluck supper, direct emergency assistance, a single-mothers support group, and a community garden. Calvary Memorial United Church nearby is now a partner in this Community Ministry. This sermon was preached at St. Mark's on the Third Sunday of Lent, March 26, 2000.

Wednesday – Wednesday night's Community Ministry supper. What does that make you think of? Is it chicken night? or leftovers? Maybe pasta with salad and hot bread? Is Wednesday the night you're in a rush between lessons – one has hockey and the other has dance, so just grab something fast? Is it the night you stay after work for meetings – you'll eat later, whenever. Maybe Wednesday is just another night.

At our house Wednesdays during Lent have always meant potluck at church – an evening of worship, learning, fellowship and food. A great midweek injection. It's where Jason discovered the best pumpkin pie and where the baker, Jim's mom, Mildred Oakley, became his new friend.

When this event evolved from a temporary Lenten gathering into a weekly Wednesday supper, our family accepted this and it became as

much a part of our household routine as Sunday morning worship.

Wednesday night at our house is lots of things, but at the Community Ministry Supper it's never just another night. It's always a surprise. How many will be there and who will they be? What foods will be shared and the big question, Will there be ice cream for dessert?

In preparing for this sermon I thought about why I felt compelled to rush home from work on Wednesdays to create a supper dish or dishes that would be tasty, satisfying, healthy and able to serve lots of hungry people and then pack it up and cart it off to the church. I had no ideas why I did it! I just did.

I wondered if the answer may be in the question, *What would be missed if St. Mark's no longer provided this supper hour?* I decided not only to ponder this myself but to ask some of the regulars on Wednesday. Here's a sample of their replies:

Jay – whom some of you may have met when he handed out the order of service on Ash Wednesday evening – initially reacted with shock. I could tell by his eyes and his shoulders he was afraid of what I was implying. I assured him this was just a question and nothing more. Then he replied with his usual quip, “The food” – then his laugh, and he carried on naming those he would miss: Nancy, John, Val, Ed, you....

Maurice also answered with an immediate “The food,” then paused and carried on, sharing that, if he needed to, he could always find food: on the street, in the garbage there's always food around. But here, here he had a safe haven, a respite. If you can imagine, he used the word “amnesty”.

Jim says he's always been a loner, and now that he hasn't a regular job with co-workers to chat with daily, he looks forward to the companionship these Wednesday suppers provide. He also likes to be a help and every week dries dishes and puts dishes away.

Pastor Jim Bindernagel meets Jesus through his contacts. It's a regular reminder to him of Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats, especially Matthew 25:37: “When did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you something to drink?”

And me. Yes, I'd miss the people. There've been so many over the years. A neighbourhood couple and a sister who even came back to show off their new twins. Sinadu, who shared her story and native foods.

Macah and David bringing placemats, candles, roast beef, and eggs. Mark, about half my age with twice as much life-experience. Ed – “Santa” to all – who had lost a wife and daughter in a tragic accident. A few teenage girls who came regularly with delicious desserts and willing hands to clean up. Tim – someone I knew from my high school days. Darryl and Cindy, who really started it all by saying, “See ya’ next week” after our last Lenten supper years ago. Diane, Elina, Val, Linda, Jim and Wilma Marie Bindernagel, Pastor Nancy and Bob Kelly, and all the others that come in the kitchen to help. Trudy, who attends regularly with her son and is a devoted help in the kitchen, told us last week to bring only veggies, or a salad or rolls – she was going to prepare the main course. There she was this past Wednesday in the kitchen cooking all afternoon and serving up baked chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy to everyone (that was about 50 people in fact).

On Wednesdays there is no us and them. They accept and embrace me in my business clothes and with my intact family and I them with their sometimes unkempt look and unknown past. We are an interesting group of caring, interested, intelligent and usually cheery people from a wide variety of background experiences: pastors, teachers, farmers, factory workers, landscapers, movers, delivery person, engineer, parents, teens, and children. If someone is missing, there’s usually one or more that ask about them: Is Klaus working? Where’s Jason? Have you seen Tim? Wonder where Jim is.

Conversations around the table vary: the weather, the week so far, what’s coming up, current events, religion, politics. At some tables there may be little or no conversation, just quiet enjoyment of the meal. It’s a comfortable, come-as-you-are-and-be-yourself environment, with no judgements. Our differences and lifestyles are ignored. We have had our opportunity to share and receive.

It’s a weekly reminder to me that the importance of being a disciple is to reflect Jesus’ way of being in the world. Not to be too busy being gods ourselves, independent and self-sufficient, caught up in our selfishness and pride. This week I was so concerned about what people would think when they came to our home, and found my kitchen wallpapering project still in a disarrayed state rather than the perfect picture of completion, that I almost missed Trudy’s meal. To think that I would choose wallpapering over chicken and gravy.

Yes, I know why I come to Wednesday supper: it’s the people, the

gathering of people, the opportunity for each one to serve and nurture the other with childlike qualities of humility, trust and receptivity as we embrace our dependency and give up our adult obsession with self-sufficiency. We need each other. With this in mind, it doesn't matter if I get a plateful of good food or just a meagre portion, if I spend an hour in the kitchen or fifteen minutes. Whether I sit beside a new face or a familiar regular whose name I know, I always leave with the feeling of having been at a family event, a celebration.

After all, what is life but a celebration? Each day we're given the opportunity to choose what and with whom we'll celebrate. On Wednesdays I choose St. Mark's Community Ministry Supper. Amen.