

On Brisket, Breakfast Tacos, and The Table That Sustains

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Based on Isaiah 25:6-9

Like any good pilgrimage, this sermon series of Sabbatical Stories begins at the end.

I call it “The First Homecoming” in my sabbatical proposal. Returning to San Antonio, Texas, deep in the heart, to check in with a congregation I served as an Interim Pastor fifteen years ago. This congregation asks its pastor to proclaim, as they gather for worship each week, “Bienvenides, People of God. Welcome Home!”

“Home” it surely was — and still is — for the spiritually homeless, the physically homeless, the outcast and reject, the queer and the immigrant. A lot like SPC in that regard: a church of last resort, holding and healing “church hurt” like we do.

The church itself was hurting bad when I arrived as their Interim Pastor all those years ago. A beloved Senior Pastor who had battled on behalf of the LGBTQIA+ community with the scars to prove it had recently retired. An Associate Pastor, semi-closeted because the denomination had not yet achieved Ordination Equality, had been brought up on charges of embezzlement — and then left the ministry altogether. The Youth Director, who was best friends with the Associate Pastor left in protest. The first Interim Pastor took continuing education after two weeks on the job, declared she had been assaulted by a parishioner, and never came back.

Half of the worshipping community had left — most of whom were heterosexual and had other places they could go — and the majority gay community that remained was reeling. A congregation that only months before had felt rightly proud of the ministry they offered themselves and the larger metro area had crumbled with no real sense of how to rebuild, other than to put one foot in front of the other and get to work. Which is exactly what they did.

The day I arrived, the Chair of the Hospitality Committee sat me down and told me how it was going to be. “Receptions Are Us,” she insisted, listing out all the ways she was going to make sure the congregation celebrated something — ANYTHING — every week until their spirits lifted.

The first reception was to welcome me to Texas. Remember, EVERYTHING is bigger in Texas! The brisket was dripping in fat. The icing on the chocolate cake — shaped like the state of Texas — oozed into the extra pound of butter sweating out of the green bean casserole. Queso blanco macaroni and cheese topped with jalapeño guacamole. Triple decker red velvet cake with a cherry on top. Here, in the midst of a congregation that had fallen apart, was the greatest feast I could ever imagine. It was like the Whos down in Whoville defying the mean old Grinch who meant to rob them of their Christmas. And it worked!

Slowly, over time, with a lot of hard work, often fueled by pizza parties, that congregation came through. They asked the hard questions of themselves and they did the hard work, always with chips and queso and maybe a margarita or two. When I finally passed the baton to the incoming Installed Pastor, I knew they would be fine. I knew they would be better than fine. And they are.

These fifteen years later, when I re-traced my journey on sabbatical, the feast had spread even wider. They were the ones saying to me, “Bienvenida, Welcome Home.” They showed off their new Community Garden and their reconfigured office environment. They had another reception! This time to welcome six new members to the congregation. And they were smiling. The Vision had come true.

The Vision comes true for us, too, every time we come to the table. Not as an idea to ponder intellectually or to map out with a five year plan but as a tangible taste of the feast that awaits on the other side of collapse. The feast that is in many ways already here *even during* collapse.

The maybe mini collapse we have lived through here at SPC may not be as dramatic as pastoral misconduct or congregational assault, but we, too, have been reeling through COVID and its aftermath and a once in a generation shift in leadership. A lot of what we once knew to be true is no longer, and we often feel unsettled and wonder what the future will hold. To be fair, our collapse may actually be even more dramatic, as we have borne the brunt of DOGE and the rollback of environmental standards and the abject fear of our immigrant families. Still, the Table Sustains.

I am told by my mentors and colleagues there is a period of disorientation for both pastor and people on the other side of a sabbatical. That you have had a transformative experience, and I have had a transformative experience, and integrating those transformations into one shared experience takes about the same amount of time as the actual sabbatical did. By the time we get to Advent, we should be fully integrated. In the meantime, the pilgrimage continues as we do the work in the next several months of sharing with one another our Vision of What (We Think) God Wants for us alongside our Vision of What Is.

Like any good pilgrimage, we begin our journey of reintegration at the end: deep in the heart, as a church of last resort, holding and healing “church hurt” — and any other hurt for that matter, with humble gratitude for the gift of grace that is always ours and the call to community we embrace as our own.

Beloved, friends, no matter what may be collapsing in your inner world or the world beyond these walls, the shroud has already been ripped. Receptions Are Us. The feast is before us, dripping with fat and wine that won’t go to our wasteline. Esta es la mesa de sustento. This is the table of sustenance. Bienvenides, People of God, Welcome Home!