

## Cooking Ingredients

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-14*

Some of you who attended our Thanksgiving Eve service a few years ago may remember me telling the story of the time when several years ago Amanda and I came upon one of those empty nest rites of passage when we discovered that we were going to be on our own for Thanksgiving. Our daughter was going to be away for the holiday and the rest of our extended family are far away – so we had to decide what we were going to do with ourselves on our first Thanksgiving on our own. We decided to go away for a couple days just up to Orlando. I was lamenting to a small degree this first non-traditional celebration, but we made sure to find a hotel that promised a traditional Thanksgiving feast for its guests. This was going to be the thing that eased the pain of change and the passing of time and the missing presence of our daughter. A good ol' turkey dinner. We enjoyed some sites in Orlando on Thanksgiving Day, looking forward to the Thanksgiving feast that awaited us – one that we were not having to labor over. We showed up for our 7:00 reservation and were seated. And after enjoying something to drink the waiter came and asked for our order. We pointed to the featured item on the menu – Turkey feast – turkey and all the trimmings. To which the waiter replied: “We ran out of turkey.” I was sure that I had not heard him correctly. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” “Ah, we ran out of turkey about a half hour ago.” This was the moment I began checking for the “Candid Camera” camera. I counted to 10 to gather my emotions and then calmly wondered with the waiter, “How is it that you can run out of turkey on Thanksgiving? Were you caught off guard that this might be the favored choice of your diners?” The waiter looked at me with the “Hey pal, I’m not the ordering department” expression on his face. “May I suggest,” he countered, “some chicken with turkey gravy? We have lots of turkey gravy!” I looked at Amanda and she just nodded her head and we ordered the roast chicken with extra,

extra, extra turkey gravy. And the rest of the evening we suspended our senses and imagined that the fowl upon our tongue was what the gravy was telling us. And don’t think I didn’t order three helpings of pumpkin pie!

Sometimes you just have to go with the ingredients you got.

If you have ever seen the movie *Apollo 13* or read the book by astronaut James Lovell, captain of the Apollo 13 crew, you might remember the scene when after the explosion on board that damages their oxygen delivery system the crew and Mission Control have to make many quick and urgent decisions. The first decision, after weighing the damage, is that they cannot go to the moon. What they had trained for for years, they could not attain – landing on the moon. Second decision -- getting home safely was new mission #1 – nothing else mattered. Third decision -- they have to abandon part of their ship because it required too much oxygen. And fourth, they needed to figure out a way to filter the carbon dioxide, the levels of which were rising in their vessel, and they had no hardware store to go to. They had to use what they had. Mission control engineers inventoried every available piece of unnecessary equipment on board and designed on the fly a jerry-rigged filter called “The Mailbox” and it wasn’t pretty but it was all they had. And it got them home.

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You remember the story of Jesus and his disciples followed by a mob of people wandering the hills and dales of Palestine – when it came to the end of the day and no McDonald’s or Burger King nearby – the disciples worry that the crowd – 5000 or so in number – the crowd is getting hungry and wouldn’t it be the decent thing to do to encourage them to head on to the closest village and find for themselves something to eat. Every man out for himself.

And Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” And the disciples look rather perplexed. Ah, but we didn’t prepare. We didn’t bring our Coleman stove. We didn’t pack our Ramen Noodles. And Jesus said, “Well, look at what you got.” And they scrounge up five loaves and two fish. And Jesus says – looks like enough for a meal. And the disciples say – but we’ve

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got 5000, not enough turkey for 5000. And Jesus says – looks like we have enough for a meal. And it turns out to be enough for a meal, a really big meal.

Sometimes you just have to go with the ingredients you got.

You know one of the things you learn when you are reading through the story of the Bible is that the history of the people of God is not always a bright and cheerful one. If you are looking for a walk in the park the Bible is not the book for you. The story of the people of God is no different than the story of people. Sometimes the sun shines, sometimes the clouds appear and sometimes the storms descend. The brilliance of creation, leads to the fall of Adam and Eve. The promise of Abraham, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The deliverance from Egypt, 40 years in the wilderness. The magic of Bethlehem, the suffering of the cross. Mountain top here, deep dark valley there. Some good, some bad. I have a friend who calls it, “Good, bad, both.” Life is good, life is bad, and life is both. Sometimes you have all the ingredients in the cupboard, sometimes you can hardly find a crumb.

So the people of Israel to whom Jeremiah is addressing his words are in the valley. The land of deep darkness as Isaiah called it last week. They are in exile. They have been pulled from their homes by an invading power and dragged away to a foreign

land – the kingdom of Babylon. And there they have been forced to live for generations. And there just isn’t much good about it. And looking around them there’s nothing left in the cupboard. Not much to hope about. This is just the way it’s going to be. And to these despairing people Jeremiah speaks the word of the Lord and says, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Now remember this word comes to Israel when they think they don’t have anything. There is nothing in the freezer. No turkey on the menu. No filter for the CO2. In fact the only thing they have is hope. Which may go without saying because that’s what hope is – that last thing you got when you don’t see anything else. And Jeremiah is inviting them into a hope that God will somehow take the not yet visible ingredients of their situation and turn them into a better future, a sustainable feast. And lo and behold – a new leader arises in the land, and a new political environment appears on the landscape, and the international alliances shift – and before Israel knows – the people of God are allowed to go back home.

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You see the fundamental ingredient baked into the story of God and God’s people is this deep belief that though life is not always a bed of roses – though life

does not always work out the way we planned, though the news we get is not always good – there is this deep belief that God is ever seeking to move the story to good. God is always about some redemptive purpose with the materials hidden inside our vessel. God is always cooking up a good recipe no matter what ingredients we have in the cupboard.

The great French philosopher and biologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said it this way, “Not everything is immediately good to those who seek God, but everything is capable of becoming good.”

It’s been that way ever since the beginning. I don’t know exactly how the world and universe got started. But I do believe that God is the one who got it started. And the Bible tells us that the wind, the spirit of God hovered over the deep – and God like a good cook began to play with the ingredients of chaos, of disorder, of confusion – and God somehow took what God had and began to make something, began to cook up a recipe, began to put together his favorite chili. And God said, “Oh, this is good!” And if you looked closely at the recipe you would see its part oxygen, part hydrogen, part carbon, part uranium, part cayenne pepper, and all the rest of the Periodic Chart (well, I’m not sure cayenne pepper is on the chart) – and God somehow takes it all and makes it into something good. Now it’s not that there aren’t some bad things that can happen with it – you put some ingredients together and you get an explosion. And sometimes we do that. And sometimes the wind works in such a way you get hurricanes. It’s just a part of the wildness of the creation – the spice in the stew. But at the core of it all – 98% of it all – is this ever creating God who is always trying to come up with a new recipe, a new dish, a new plan for the future.

And it is the people of God who hold this hope, this hope that somehow God is going to make something good out of what I’ve got.

Not unlike the farmer out there plowing his field. They say that the work of a farmer is 5% of what it takes to bring a crop. The other 95% are the forces of the ingredients of the universe – the sun and the rain and the soil and the potassium and the magnesium. A farmer farms with hope that the forces of life will conspire with his work to bring forth fruit.

History is filled with people who surrendered what little ingredient they had and somehow the forces of God’s creative spirit so conspired that a beautiful life ensued. Cripple him and you have a Sir Walter Scott. Make her a single mother on welfare rejected by 12 publishers and you have a J.K. Rowling. Bury him in the snows of Valley Forge and you have a George Washington. Subject him to bitter religious prejudice and you have a Disraeli. Birth her into slavery, inflict upon her as a child a traumatic head wound and you have a Harriet Tubman. Strike him down with infantile paralysis and he becomes an FDR. Have him born black in the racist south and you have Martin Luther King, Jr. Have him lose his job, fail in business, suffer a nervous breakdown, defeated in a half dozen elections and lose his own child – and what you have is Abraham Lincoln.

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Victor Frankl, survivor of the horror of the holocaust came out of the degradation of the camps with this new revelation: it’s not what you expect from life that matters, it’s what life expects from you.

You know something? I’m starting to think that one of the great missing ingredients of our day and age ... is hope. I’m starting to think that one of the things that is being expected of us is hope. I am so tired of hearing the bad news. I am so tired of hearing about the shenanigans of the rich and famous. I am so tired of hearing about the paralysis in Washington. I am so tired of hearing about uncivil behavior. I am so tired of people disrespecting each other. I am so tired of people wondering if the world is going to hell in a handbasket. And I am realizing how easy it is to lose hope. How easy it is to give into cynicism. How easy it is to despair. How easy it is to think that there is no hope for the future. But somehow maybe we have forgotten who we are and whose we are. We are the children of God. We are the people of the promise. We are the creation of a God who is always taking what we have and seeking to make good of it. And maybe that means we get to get out there and plow our field. We get to give up our lunch for the 5000. We get to let go of our hoarded money. Maybe we get to be the ones – we the Church of the Palms – maybe we get to

be the ones that the people of Sarasota look to and say – now those are the people of hope. Those are the people who see a bright future.

Kind of like the young man I encountered at the checkout at Macy’s. A few years ago. I’m buying myself some socks and I’m talking to this young Macy’s clerk. And somewhere along the way he asks me what I do and I tell him that I am the pastor at Church of the Palms. And I leave it at that. When the transaction is over the young man asks if he could talk to me for a moment, I say yes. We walk over to the corner of the store and he says, “You know, a couple years ago things were really bad for me. Really bad. I was drinking. I was doing stupid things. And I was going nowhere. And I was living in my car. And a friend finally convinced me that I needed to do something. And he told me that there was an AA group meeting at Church of the Palms on Sunday night. And he took me there. And I started going every week. And I got a sponsor. And the sponsor told me that they hand out food right from the same building – five days a week. So once a week I got a couple bags of food. And a bunch of other things happened and now I’ve been sober a couple of years and I got myself this job and I’m living in an apartment. And I don’t go to your church, never been there on a Sunday morning. But you know you guys helped save my life. And I just wanted you to know that.”

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**November 26, 2017**

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Church of the Palms

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