

Easter 7B, May 13, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

In a heavy-bottomed pot, heat 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil and 1 tablespoon butter over medium heat until melted.

Add 1 finely chopped onion, 2 ribs finely chopped celery, 1 finely chopped carrot, and 2 garlic bulbs finely sliced, season with salt, and cook until the vegetables are translucent but not browned, about 5 to 7 minutes.

Add ½ pound ground beef, ½ pound ground pork, and 2 ounces finely chopped pancetta, increase the heat to high and brown the meat, stirring frequently. Cook for 10 to 15 minutes, or until the meat is dark brown and the fat has rendered out completely. There will be a shallow pool of fat in the pan. This is desirable.

Add 2 tablespoons tomato paste and cook it in the fat for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the color is rusty orange. Add ½ cup whole milk and cook until almost completely reduced.

Add ½ cup dry white wine and bring just to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 2 to 3 hours. Season with salt, remove from the heat.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook 1 pound of short, broad pasta, such as tagliatelle or pappardelle 1 minute short of the packaged instructions. Drain, reserving pasta water for sauce.

Add the drained pasta to the sauce pot along with ½ cup of the pasta water. Stir to coat pasta.

Add ¼ cup of finely grated fresh Parmigiano cheese and 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Stir until creamy. Toss in ¼ cup chopped parsley.

Serve and garnish each plate with a generous amount of freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano.

You might recognize this recipe as the classic northern Italian pasta bolognese. Simple, rich, filling. You don't even need to have any Italian in you to call this comfort food. This isn't the heavily tomatoed sauce most Americans are used to. Mostly meat and just a little tomato. It's never meant to slather on spaghetti. It needs a broad, flat pasta for the sauce to cling to.

But rather than me tell you about it, or simply read the recipe to you, wouldn't it be better if we sat down to eat together and enjoy the meal as a shared, communal experience? The recipe, as mouth watering as it may be to hear it, can never compare to partaking the real deal, the actual eating of the food it points to.

This is how I feel about trying to preach on our gospel reading this morning. Jesus is praying. And a sermon about prayer can easily end up like reading a recipe. I can tell you all about prayer; how it's important, when we pray we are connected with God, how the Holy Spirit enters our hearts and helps us to pray. But unless we actually pray we aren't really eating the meal, we are only reading the recipe.

But then, as I got to thinking about it, I realize we all need recipes when we cook. I know the few times I've tried to cook without a recipe, just throwing a few things together for a meal, I've had very mixed results. Maybe if you are a really creative chef you might be able to do it. But even the best cooks I know follow a recipe. And I think that's true also for our prayer life. We need the recipe, the instructions, in order to actually pray.

If you stop to think about it, that's what our whole liturgy is. It's the recipe for our life of prayer. The words and actions of what we do, the hymns we sing together, the printed prayers on the page, all direct us to God. They are all prayer. When you look at the words of most of the hymns we sing, they are prayer. They are addressed to God. Together we praise God, we implore God for certain gifts, we ask God for guidance or help. All of the regular portions of the liturgy that we use each week; Glory to God, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lamb of God,; these are all prayers. All of them culminate in the great prayer of thanksgiving at Holy Communion, in which God is praised for his saving acts, the gift of Jesus' own body in bread and wine, the coming of the Holy Spirit to create and nurture faith. I can't think of anything we do in our liturgy that isn't somehow prayer. Even listening to God's Word read from the Bible and hearing a sermon is all prayer.

Liturgy is the recipe for prayer, like a food recipe is for a meal. I want to push this comparison a little further. You can read a recipe and you might be able to figure out how the final product is going to turn out. You can look through a cookbook reading the recipes to try to find something you want to serve at your next dinner party. But unless you actually use the recipe; assemble the ingredients together, prepare them, cook them in the way the recipe directs you to, you will never know how the food actually tastes.

I believe the same is true for our liturgy. You can be here in church, you can hear the words, you might even read the words or sing the hymns, but you might be doing so as

one who reads a recipe without actually creating the meal. Liturgy may be the recipe, but we are the cooks. As cooks we aren't passive readers of recipes, but fully engaged with the recipe, bringing the ingredients together, assembling them into a wonderful, simple, rich dish of soul and body satisfying food.

The ingredients we bring are ourselves; our whole selves. We bring our joys and our sorrows from the week we have experienced. We bring our hurts and our fears, our hopes and aspirations. We bring offerings of the fruits of our labor; time, money, even the offerings of bread and wine. We even bring those ingredients we would rather leave at home; our own failings and failures and the ways we have hurt others and offended God. To leave anything out means the meal will be incomplete.

But of course, these aren't the only ingredients. Here is where the prayer Jesus prays is so central and vital. Notice how he prays; "I am asking on their behalf." (John 17:9) Jesus is praying. He is praying for us. Jesus also is bringing ingredients to this meal. We pray to God on behalf of the world and for those in need. Jesus prays to the Father on our behalf. Jesus is not just the meal, the end product of our bringing the ingredients together. Jesus is right there alongside us, bringing himself, cooking this wonderful meal with us, and laying the feast before us. Only one who now lives beyond the grave can promise to stand with us now, and join us at this banquet.

This is prayer. Fully engaged with the recipe we call the liturgy, assembling the ingredients Jesus brings and those we bring of our whole selves, feasting on the rich meal of God's grace and love that results. Amen.