

*Lord, without Your Spirit, these words are just words. Give them life, that we may have life. Amen*

This afternoon I am hosting a potluck picnic for anyone in the Christ Churches who wants to come. I was inspired to do this by today’s gospel reading – the story of one of the greatest picnics that ever was.

Jesus may not have invented the picnic, but he took it up a few thousand notches. I don’t know what those who gathered there that day to hear him teach, and to be healed, experienced when his team suddenly started giving out food, but there is something about eating outside, away from the ordinary, that awakens our senses. We expect to eat inside; when we eat outside, in trees, on grass, with birds and ants and squirrels around, we wake up. It’s like that with our spiritual lives too – learning to be alive to encounters with God outside these walls awakens our spirits, makes us available to knowing God and being known in ways that may not happen if we stay in the same, predictable patterns.

Picnics take place anywhere: on a beach, in a back yard, on a blanket laid out on a grassy field, at an outdoor concert, or wolfing down a sandwich at a bus stop. But generally they happen outside.

Church, like a picnic, is meant to be lived outside.

99% of our time being church is outside of here – we can’t focus so much of our energy as Christ-followers on what happens in this building.

Just as Jesus sent his disciples out, so we are sent out –

outside the walls of churches and homes, on the road and in the streets, taking God’s love and life to wherever people are hungry for it.

Our faith gets stronger when we exercise it in new surroundings, stretching beyond our comfort zones and comfortable communities.

I ask this every week: Who around you needs to meet God through you?

And faith, like a picnic, needs to be unwrapped.

Picnics come in baskets and boxes and bags, each element neatly nested.

Watching a picnic come out of its containers is like seeing a mystery unfold – what’s in that bag? What’s in that container? What does it taste like?

At its best, that’s what growing in faith can be – discovering nuggets in scriptures, learning new songs of praise, sensing God’s presence in prayer or ministry, tasting the richness of love in community.

We do that here every Thursday at Lunch & Learn,  
and soon we'll start up our online bible study again.  
Night Prayers at 8 each weekday evening is a spiritual picnic each night,  
with different people contributing different gifts.  
Later this fall we'll offer another round of "Being With," which invites people  
to explore Christian faith in an open and supportive community setting.  
It's not so much the activity as the spirit we bring to it: if we cultivate a spirit of  
exploration and expectation, expecting to be surprised by God, we will be.

Picnics are usually shared experiences, right? And often the meal  
is a combination of foods brought by different participants.  
This is how we live our faith communally, in church and out,  
with each person bringing the "dish" they make best,  
providing their gifts in beautiful diversity to make up a picnic that is delicious  
and varied, with unexpected pairings of tastes and textures and colors.

And when we bring our gifts together – including our financial gifts –  
we add them to a picnic God has already prepared for us,  
God's picnics are always joint efforts between us and each other, us and God –  
and then us and the strangers we may find ourselves sharing food with.  
That day on that hillside the disciples went to see what resources there were.  
They first assumed there were not enough – how could there be?  
Jesus said, "Well, don't assume. Go and find out."  
Even then, it didn't seem like enough, but this one kid had some fish and bread,  
and he was willing to share, and somehow it kept being enough.  
That is our experience here at church –  
we keep having enough, despite our deficit budgets.  
When we each bring what we can, and share it in faith, we have enough.

God wants us to bring our gifts to the picnic,  
even if God gave us those gifts in the first place. That's how it works.  
God's picnics are always joint efforts between us and each other, us and God –  
and then us and the strangers we may find ourselves sharing food with.  
Because that's another thing about picnics: they don't just happen –  
someone needs to plan and prepare them. But sometimes we experience  
them as serendipitous if someone else has planned it.  
I am so taken with this idea of our going out and offering pop-up worship and  
picnic experiences in our community – in parks or right outside our door.

One time in Stamford we did this for Pentecost – we got a permit to use a downtown park, and we set up tables and had food and played music and did church, right there, inviting people to join us.

Not that many stopped to stay, but a few came.

It's like what we do at Port Tobacco or when we do Blessing of Animals...

but we're doing it someplace people can see us, can find us, can join us.

We planned it, but for passersby it was an unexpected feast.

Unexpected feasts is what God offers us; when we look for them,

we don't always experience them – God is always doing a new thing.

But as we cultivate an orientation toward expecting blessing;

as we work to develop unexpected feasts for other people,

we just may find that life IS a picnic, God's picnic, for us all the time.

Amen.

### **John 6:1-14**

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."