

“WHAT’S IN YOUR COOKBOOK?” A Sermon Delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 24, 2022

Over the past year or more, one of the VISA credit cards being marketed has featured advertisements with the actress Jennifer Garner. In promoting the card Garner plays out various scenarios, including one with her gruff dad. But every ad finishes with the same question. “What’s in your wallet?”

I’m not hawking anything today, not asking anything about your wallet. However, I do have a question for you all that’s different yet in another way no less intimate. Namely, “What’s in your cookbook?”

I pop that question, which comes to mind for me, because some weeks back a member of our congregation, Dave Kulhanek, stopped by the church with a clipping that he discovered in his late wife’s cookbook. Bev, his wife of fifty-four years, died suddenly and unexpectedly this past March. Besides being a life partner, she was a devoted daughter, sister, mother, and grandmother. She also had a great career as a medical assistant for a local doctor. Yet, if I may take the liberty of saying so, what Bev loved most of all was being a homemaker for her family, immediate and extended. Being a homemaker was a point of pride and joy. And it all started in her kitchen.

Now what good cook doesn’t have a cookbook—and maybe more than one or two? As fine as our culinary skills are, no matter how well we’re trained to navigate the kitchen, there’s always more to learn from others. My own mother cherished a cookbook called *Let’s Cook It Right*. I inherited it when she passed on. It has a place of honor on the parsonage kitchen shelves. However, as I found out, my mother didn’t rely on the printed cookbook alone. Stuffed between the leaves of its pages were a couple of dozen or more recipes she had clipped from newspapers or magazines over the years and made a staple of her own kitchen cooking.

In stepping into Bev’s kitchen, Dave probably expected to find something similar. Knowing Bev as I did in all her brave and adventurous spirit, it wouldn’t surprise me if she too had her own share of clippings. Nevertheless, amid all else found, Dave came across a cache of “Xmas Recipes” with one more amazing than the rest. Instead of offering the ingredients for another savory dish, it proffered some food for thought—deep thought about how we should live our lives. I think it’s very relevant for all who take the responsibility of living a Christian life seriously.

As Dave found it and presented to me, just as he has shared it with others who knew and loved Bev, the “recipe” is actually a Christmas prayer. It reads...

“Heavenly Father, help us to remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single parent who has worked nine hours that day and is rushing home to cook dinner,

help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with their children.” Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young adult, who can’t make change correctly, is a worried 19 year-old college student, trying to balance their apprehension over final exams and their fear of not getting their student loans for next semester. Remind us that the scary looking bum, begging for money in the same spot every day (who really ought to get a job) is suffering from addiction that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares. Help us to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and hindering our shopping progress are savoring this previous moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report they got back last week, this will be the past year they go shopping together. Remind us each day, Lord, that of all of the gifts you give us, the greatest is LOVE.”

In a simple handwritten note from Dave Kulhanek that accompanied the recipe and prayer, he noted: “[Bev] saved things that meant a lot to her.” Bev’s recipe and prayer mean a lot to me now too.

You know, sometimes when folks pass on to their maker or wherever else they might be headed, families and friends discover all kinds of hidden things—deep secrets kept. Yet how wonderful to uncover these words that obviously inspired and encouraged Bev in her own life path. This recipe and prayer discovered is like Bev talking to her family and to us all. Don’t be so self-absorbed and critical of others. Stay humble. Remain compassionate. Keep loving other people—just as our Heavenly Father and his son Jesus keeps on loving us even though we may not always be so worthy of such blessing. This is the Christian way.

In his own ministry, Jesus always looked for the story behind the story. Rather than accept the common prejudices of his day, he sought to discover the person behind presenting circumstances, no matter how embarrassing and morally compromising the situation immediately appeared to be. Most remarkably, even though he was God’s son, Jesus didn’t presume to know everything without asking. He was also disposed to look for a whatever shred of good might linger in whoever he met, never forgetting that God made us all and are created in his image. Jesus refused to dismiss anyone sincerely seeking to be good and to do good.

This is why he accepted hospitality from a tax collector whom everyone else automatically assumed was corrupt. (*Matthew 19:9-17*) The same tax collector, a short guy, went on to become the Apostle Matthew, one of Jesus’ greatest companions in faith, whose gospel inspires us today. Likewise, Jesus was willing to engage directly with three ladies whom no one else thought were worth giving even the time of day. One was a non-Jewish Syro-Phoenician woman—a suspicious foreigner—who pled for her daughter’s healing, humbly comparing herself in her spiritual desperation to a dog seeking scraps from a kosher household table. (*Matthew 15:21-28*) The second woman was a

Samaritan, who had already been divorced several times over. (*John 4:1-26*) She probably would have been considered a “scarlet woman” in her day, scorned as a tramp. But you know how those Samaritans are—at least as every good Jew then thought. Last, but not least, there was an adulteress thrust into Jesus’ face by a gang of guys ready to stone her to death, no questions asked, in keeping with the strictest Mosaic law. (*John 7:53-8:11*)

In every case, however, Jesus demonstrated respect for those faced with a moral and social quandary. Allowing them to interrupt his busy itinerary, which was taking him all over the place preaching God’s word of salvation, he gave all three women the precious gift of time. Thereupon, Jesus also listened deeply to what was going on with each of these troubled souls.

Jesus’ encounter with the adulteress is particularly revealing and moving. To the mob who wants to murder the adulteress by stoning her against prevailing Roman law, which denies them the authority to do this, he simply and calmly says, “Let the one without sin cast the first stone.” Giving these men time to reflect on his moral charge presented to them, Jesus then devotes himself in the moment to writing or drawing something in the dirt. What could it have been? We never know, because it’s really beside the point. When Jesus next looks up, he notices that he and the adulteress are all alone. All those self-righteous, judgmental men have fled, perhaps from moral embarrassment. “Has no one condemned you?” Jesus then asks the woman. When she says “no”—no one has—Jesus, who has elsewhere preached against the sinfulness of adultery, straight-forwardly counsels her to “Go, and sin no more.” (*Matthew 5: 27; Luke 18:18-20*)

Although an act of adultery is not good for our moral and spiritual well-being, moral hypocrisy isn’t either. Nor are prejudice, anger, and malice. On the positive side of things, we need as God’s true servants to be a compassionate and loving, even giving others the benefit of the doubt until it becomes clear that they hardly deserve it. Even then, Jesus leaves us with a note of caution. At Calvary’s cross, what did he say to God in the face of those so viciously persecuting him? “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23:34*)

Few people understood Jesus’ mindset and gospel as God’s son better than the Apostle Paul. We see this clearly in his First Letter to the Corinthians. (*1 Corinthians 13:1-13*) Most significantly, Paul there describes the profound limitations of our powers of observation as men and women, our truncated ability to discern what is really happening at any given time. Even more specifically, Paul writes to the budding Christians of Corinth, a city of ancient Greece, asking them to act with an emotional, moral, and spiritual maturity which is most becoming to them. “When I was a child,” he notes, “my

speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child.” But now, he continues, as a grown man “I have no more use for childish ways.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)

On the other hand, Paul then goes on to explain that even if we have all the maturity in the world, it’s still going to be a struggle as God’s children and Christ’s disciples fully figuring out what is right and true because of our inherent human constraints. As Paul so astutely puts it: “What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror.” (1 Corinthians 13: 12a) It is “partial” vision or perspective only. (1 Corinthians 13: 12b) Moreover, nothing will change until we are at God’s side with Jesus, finally empowered to see everything “face to face,” “complete” and total as it truly is. (1 Corinthians 13:12c) In other words, when each of us look out on the world and other people, what we see is all too often a mere projection of ourselves, rather than others for who they really are. What can redeem this awkward situation for the meantime and prevent us from becoming wrongly self-righteous in such all-too-human projections is love on our part—love and forgiveness for others, love and forgiveness for ourselves.

As the Apostle Peter pointedly observed, “Love covers a multitude of sin.” (1 Peter 4:8) Yet Paul says the same thing and perhaps more elegantly, reminding us that “love never gives up” even in the face of other folks’ real or imagined foibles, frailties, or sins. (1 Corinthians 13:7a) Paul concludes by noting that faith, hope, and love are three seminal Christian virtues that we should all embrace, but “the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Congregation, that’s what Bev Kulhanek’s Christmas recipe and prayer were all about—faith, hope, *and* love. Throw in an extra dollop of Christian humility too. Count all this as a wonderful recipe and prayer not just for a usual December Christmas or a Christmas in July but for whatever season is faith is upon us.

At the outset, I asked a question. Do you remember it? What’s in *your* cookbook? I hope your recipe and prayer are no less faithful and loving. **Amen.**