



Resource Centre

From our Churches

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God, Am I Good Enough? **The Borscht and Buns Community Fundraiser** Luke 18:9-14

“God, am I good enough?” It is an important question. It is a question which invites reflection and which often results in a sobering humility. It is a question asked regularly. And the question becomes particularly poignant as the participants of Eighth Mennonite Church, in the small town of Banyon prepare for the annual “Borscht & Buns Community Fundraiser.” God, am I good enough? Will I have the best borscht this year?

No one really remembers whose idea it was. The changing days of autumn just seem like a natural time for making soup that warms the chilled bones. And sharing your favourite soup with friends and church community is a gift warmly received.

“Borscht & Buns” was already an annual potluck that overflowed the bowls and the church basement. But then, someone suggested a little inter-church “fund-raiser might be fun; after all, people from Eighth Mennonite aren’t the only ones who make Borscht. Maybe we could have a little “fund-raiser which is not a competition” to see whose Borscht tastes best, and at the same time, raise a little money for the local Food Bank. And so, a “Borscht & Buns Community Fundraiser” was organized. And because it happened once it became an annual event.

The churches of Banyon scrambled to line up their best soup-makers and entered their names; Third Mennonite was always first to register. Sixth Mennonite had a standing spot. The other Eighth Mennonite Church, known as Old Eighth Mennonite because they were new immigrants to the community, was sure to enter. And then there was Hope Mennonite, who never stood a chance of winning, and one year were registered together with the name of their pastor, Les; Hope-Les Mennonite.

There weren’t only Mennonite churches, however. The Lutherans thought they still knew something about making borscht from their days in the “Old Country.” Anyone with Ukrainian heritage was considered to be either Catholic or Baptist, and since there wasn’t a Baptist church in town, the Catholics figured they had something special to contribute. And even the United Church entered the “fund-raiser which is not a competition,” although occasionally they had to phone and ask for a recipe, which of course, doesn’t exist.

The soups were many and varied, each nuanced by the character and imagination of its creator. Potatoes and cabbage were often in abundance. Chunks from a hearty beef roast added substance, although some preferred to use ground beef, or even chicken. Beets added a deep and colourful richness to the presentation; carrots added nothing. Some added a can of Heinz tomato soup and a lot of dill. Others included red peppers and parsley. The special Ukrainian-Catholic Borscht used only beets, onions and Lima beans; no meat, no vegetables. Someone from Sixth Mennonite discovered, to their horror, that it almost ran right through you, in a colour that was worrisome.

The way the competition worked was like this; pots of soup were set out in a row, with empty offering buckets set in front of the pots and the cook behind them. People would sample small amounts of the various soups, and then would put money in the bucket which stood in front of their favourite soup, or in front of their favourite Oma, I mean “soup maker.” Inevitably, some soups disappeared quickly and some buckets filled exponentially, as the “fund-raiser which is not a competition” neared an end.

And inevitably, it was Elsie from Third Mennonite who was recognized as having “the best Borscht in Banyon.” Year after year, Elsie went forward to receive the Wooden Spoon, emblematic of soup-supremacy.

As the years went by, and Elsie continued to rack up her spoons, the cabbage began to smell for some participants. They were becoming discouraged and at the point of dropping out. The behind-the-pots grumbling spread and soon even the Borscht didn't taste so good. In fact, some decided they would go to Arby's next year. What started out as a “fund-raiser which is not a competition,” had become a lunch donation without a tax-receipt.

It was about that time that Doris stepped forward, volunteering to make a pot of Borscht on behalf of the United Church. Although few knew her, it turned out Doris was the coordinator of her church's community lunch program. Well, any change would be a welcome change, and maybe even elicit a few donations, maybe “resurrect” the spirit of the event in the best ecumenical sense of the word.

And so, Doris showed up with a pot of United Church Borscht. Yet it soon became clear that the spirit hadn't shown up at the same time. First, Doris broke an unwritten rule; the soup-maker can't have any help, unless it is your daughter or daughter-in-law or grand-daughter, or someone that's no more distantly related than a second cousin. Doris had the audacity to invite people attending the community lunch program to help her make and serve the Borscht. There was Audette in a wheelchair. Do you know how difficult it is to re-arrange the tables so that a person in a wheelchair can serve the soup? There was Charnelle, a single mother, with two small children crawling under and among the tables. There was Ray, and nobody wanted to think about hair from Ray's beard being in the Borscht. Is it any wonder that the line-up of people waiting to serve the United Church Borscht was longer than the people waiting in line to receive it?

As it turned out, the controversy was only beginning. A pious pastor from one of the churches mustered the faith to be the first to sample the United Church Borscht. Watching carefully, the pastor's wife detected noodles, mushrooms and kidney beans. It wasn't evident what this soup was, but it clearly wasn't Borscht. It turned out Doris had used supplies left over from their community meals as ingredients for the soup. The recipe seemed to include whatever was at hand without additional expense.

Conversation quickly rippled down the lines and around the tables, with a couple of experienced Borscht Baba's suggesting that the United Church withdraw from the "fund-raiser which is not a competition." But it was too late for that.

And then in a surprising twist, donations began to increase for the other soups, almost as if people were saying with their wallets; "This is what real Borscht is like and I'm willing to make a sacrifice in order to prove it." The buckets began to fill and the soup pots began to empty as participants went back to make a second and even a third donation.

Then came the time everyone was waiting for, when the opportunity to donate ended and the Wooden Spoon was to be awarded. But first, a blessing was needed, and ironically, it was the pious pastor who had been asked in advance to deliver the blessing. Most people knew it was time to settle in.

With his prepared prayer in hand, the pastor began;

"God and Father of all humankind, I thank you that you have shaped humanity in your image; with a mind to know and a heart to love. I thank you that Jesus Christ, your Son and our Saviour, has embraced all people in love and forgiveness. I thank you that you judge all people, not by brains or beauty, not by skill or achievement but by your saving grace which is always a gift. I thank you for the thousand differences that make us unique and special, but most of all I thank you for the ways that you are in me and in each of your people. AMEN.

It was a nice prayer, and surprisingly short. But for Charnelle's two small children, it seemed like the beginning of eternity.

No one really knows where the inspiration came from but, while all the adults bowed their heads and closed their eyes, the two children decided to fill the empty United Church bucket from the contents of the other buckets. By the time, "Amen" was declared, the United Church bucket was overflowing and the other buckets were lying discarded to the side.

That was the last year of the annual "Borscht & Buns Community Fundraiser." No one is sure if there was a Wooden Spoon handed out that year. What they are sure is that people accessing the Food Bank got what they deserved. And what they are sure of is the actions and offerings of a room full of sinners were gathered together by two small children and made holy before God in prayer. It was a day I will never forget, for that was the day we went for a bowl of soup, and went home justified, convinced that God is good enough to care for all people.