

“Not your Typical Five and Diner”

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If you have spent much time in Arizona, especially in the Phoenix area, there is a good chance that you have either eaten at, or driven past restaurants called the Five and Diner. The first Five and Diner was created in 1989 as a place where people would be transported in time to a place where life was simpler. The restaurant was decorated with a 1950's flashback theme and featured a menu that was simple, affordable, and top quality. The owners of the restaurant also tried to create an atmosphere that was fun, welcoming and relaxed that reflected the personalities of their customers.

Five and Diner is no longer a single restaurant, but a franchise of restaurants expanding coast to coast across the country. It is now the 28<sup>th</sup> largest food contractor in the United States and still growing. If you go to their website on the internet, you will discover their claim that they serve the best burgers and shakes in the world. If our economy continues to gain strength, I will not be surprised to see a Five and Diner coming into the Bend area.

Yet, in spite of the franchise owners' desire to create a place where everyone feels welcome, and comfortable, and well fed, you and I both know that not everyone who comes to the restaurant will leave feeling satisfied, or relaxed, or even welcomed. First, you have to be able to pay for the food that you order, so if your pockets are empty – you best stay away. Second, you have to have an appetite for burgers, shakes, and fries, and other 1950's comfort food. So if for health reasons your diet is restricted, or your taste buds are hungry for something more exotic – you best stay away, too. Third, if your personality is other than fun loving, easy going, and comfortable, you best stay away because you don't fit the expected personality profile of desired customers. If you've had a difficult day, or are in a bad mood, or are uptight and stressed out because of an argument, your negative energy may effect the ambiance of the diner for the other "happy" eaters and unless you can leave your troubles in the car, or check them at the door, there is no place at the table for you.

The truth of the matter is that even at the Five and Diner there are people who are not welcomed and for a variety of reasons, many legitimate, others not, they will not be served. This truth was surprisingly made evident to me this last week at a meeting of the district committee on ordained ministry. We were

interviewing a local pastor who serves two churches in the Columbia River Gorge. He shared with us about the changes that are happening in his churches because of the change from an economy based on agriculture to an economy based on energy, wind power to be exact. There are large numbers of construction workers coming into the communities where he serves to help install the towering windmills that harness the wind's power. And while the ranchers still work at farming their land and understand the benefits of diversifying their economy, they feel increasing resentment toward the people who are changing their landscape and interfering with their traditional lifestyles. He shared with us that the tension between the long established agricultural people and the construction workers has gotten so strong that the pizza parlor in town refuses to serve any person they suspect of being a construction worker. And the only motel in town refuses to provide lodging to anyone they suspect might work for a construction company or an energy firm. And even in his churches, he has to constantly remind his congregations that in Christ there is neither rancher or construction worker, but all people are welcome to their place at the table of the Lord's grace.

As I listened to the pastor share his experience with his churches, it reminded me of a story that Fred Craddock told in a sermon about the first church he served in the eastern hills of Tennessee, close to Oak Ridge. It was the time when the atomic energy plants were coming into the region and the little town where his church was located became a booming city almost over night. People came from everywhere, and pitched tents. Some lived in wagons. Every trailer park was filled with people looking for temporary housing until the construction phase of the projects were over.

The church Craddock served was a pretty little white framed church, a hundred and twelve years old. There were kerosene lamps with glass chimneys all around the walls. Every pew was hewn by hand from the same giant poplar tree. There was a pump organ in the corner that Miss Lois played while one of the boys in the church filled the billows with air.

One Sunday morning after church Craddock suggested to the leaders of the church that they might want to launch a calling campaign with an invitation to come to church to the people living in the trailer parks.

“Oh, I don’t know,” one of the members said, “I don’t think they’d fit in here. They’re just temporarily here – construction workers you know. They’ll be leaving pretty soon and I don’t think they’d be comfortable.”

“Well, I think we ought to invite them,” Craddock said, “Make them feel at home.”

There followed a long discussion and when time ran out, they all agreed to take a vote after church the next Sunday.

The next Sunday, after the service, the leaders of the congregation gathered again. The first person who spoke said, “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” The motion was quickly seconded, and although Craddock spoke against it, it passed overwhelmingly. Several people reminded Craddock that he was just a kid preacher who didn’t understand the ways of the real world.

Many years later, when Craddock and his wife moved back into the area, he took his wife to see the little church because he had told her about his painful, painful experience there. An interstate had been built and the roads in the area had changed so

that Craddock had a hard time finding the church. But he finally did, down a little country road, at the end of a gravel driveway. The church was there nestled among the pines still shining white. But it was different. The parking lot was full – motorcycles, pickup trucks and cars, all packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: “*Barbecue, all you can eat.*”

Seeing that the church was now a restaurant, they went inside. The pews were pushed up against the wall. The kerosene lamps had been replaced with electric lights, but the little pump organ was still there in the corner. There were aluminum table and plastic chairs and all kinds of different people sitting there eating barbecue pork and chicken and ribs. “It’s a good thing this is still not a church,” Craddock whispered to his wife, “otherwise these people couldn’t be in here.”

It isn’t any easier being the church than it is being a Five and Diner. Maybe it’s even more difficult because people bring to the church much more than their need to be fed with food. And with increased demands and greater needs, the opinions about how to respond to those needs also expands and grows. Whose needs are most important? Whose needs should be taken care of first? What if meeting the

needs of one group causes discomfort or difficulty for another? Especially if your resources are limited how do you decide whose needs are met and whose needs are left unfulfilled? How do you avoid creating an environment where some people feel like they are “in” while other people feel like they are “out?” There’s no doubt about it, we human beings are good at creating boundaries. What’s difficult is pushing beyond them when those boundaries serve no useful purpose and are actually detrimental to our life together.

Overcoming boundaries has been a challenge for the church from the very beginning. That’s the challenge that is at the heart of our reading from Acts for today. The boundary needing to be overcome is the boundary that divides Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians. The feeling among many of the early Jewish Christians was that if Gentiles wanted to become part of the church and disciples of Jesus they would need to adopt Jewish covenantal laws including circumcision and dietary restrictions.

Peter’s dream is the revelation that the church is not your typical Five and Diner. When it comes to the table of the Lord, when the discussion is about who is welcome to be part of the church and included in the community of Christ’s beloved, there is no

restriction. Everyone is welcome. All who come with a desire to be fed with God's love will be fed. No one is a stranger. No one is outside the boundaries of God's grace or excluded from God's love. Peter's vision was not easy for him to accept. It went against everything he had been taught and challenged him to eat with people he had never shared table fellowship with before. It also put him at odds with his fellow Jewish Christians who argued against the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. But when his vision is authenticated for him by his meeting with Cornelius, he knows that God cannot be denied. The Spirit of God is at work to bring all people together.

We are gathered together today at our Lord's table. When we come to feast together on Christ's love, I invite you to consider what boundary God is inviting you to overcome as you walk the journey of discipleship. Remember that this table is not your typical Five and Diner, but is known to us as Holy Communion. And ponder these words of Frederick Buechner as you come to be refreshed and filled:

*This meal is called Holy Communion because when feeding at this implausible table, Christians believe that they are communing with the Holy One himself, his spirit enlivening their spirits, heating the*

*blood and gladdening the heart just the way wine, as spirits, can.*

*They are also, of course, communing with each other. To eat any meal is to meet at the level of our most basic need. It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin or to keep your distance when asking for the tomato ketchup.*

*To eat this particular meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic humanness, which involves our need not just for food but for each other. I need you to help fill my emptiness just as you need me to help fill yours. As for the emptiness that's still left over, well we're in it together, or it in us. Maybe it's most of what makes us human and makes us brothers.*

*And the next time you walk down the street, take a good look at every face you pass and in your mind say Christ died for thee. That girl. That slob. That phony. That crook. That saint. That damned fool. Christ died for thee. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee.*

This table is not our typical Five and Diner.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.

