

Hinton Rural Life Center
Celebrating 60: Embracing Our Roots & Sharing the Fruits

Reflections . . .

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[Jesus] said . . . , “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

-- Luke 14:12-14, NRSV

Every summer in high school, my youth group boarded two small, white buses and travelled eight and a half hours from outside Savannah, Georgia, to the Hinton Rural Life Center in Hayesville, North Carolina. Those eight hours of driving while listening to 90s boy bands was only made tolerable by the prospect of meeting girls. This is how service trips often work for high school boys: you sign up to meet girls, but you end up meeting Jesus instead. It's the best bait and switch ever devised.

One year my group was assigned to work with an elderly woman on her dilapidated house. She lived alone and her house smelled of water damage; it was musty and moldy. This was the first time I remember holding my nose in another person's living space. Our task was to put up some sheetrock, I think, but I don't remember much about the work. Here's what I do remember: she had a large cucumber garden.

Every day at noon we would take a break from snapping blue lines on sheetrock to sit down at the table together. This woman went to her garden and picked cucumbers and piled them up on her table outside. Take, eat. And so we ate cucumbers. Notice, this is plural—multiple cucumbers. We listened to stories about her family as we shared about ours. She gave us gardening advice and talked about the year's crop.

“Y'all want some salt on your cucumbers,” she said in her Appalachian twang. I had never seen anyone put salt on cucumbers, but it turns out that it's not some weird custom. Apparently, everyone does this. The salt cuts the bitterness and brings out the fresh, crisp coolness of the cucumber. And so, Jesus reminds us to be the salt of the earth.

Now, this was a diminutive moment in the scheme of my life, and yet, it was one of my early moments of catechesis in the Christian faith. I learned that my work in the mountains was less about fixing houses and more about entering into the mystery of another's life, though I wouldn't be able to articulate it until years later. No person is a project to be fixed. No one person is the sole savior of another. Mission and incarnation are inseparable, as part of our mission always entails the beautiful, risky entangling of lives that are simultaneously poor and rich.

It's no wonder that Jesus often connected service with tables. The table has the capacity to subvert our power structures and remind us of our weakness and dependency on one another. It is one of the few spheres of resistance that creates a breathing space where order and hierarchy are subverted. We come to the table empty, longing to be filled, but it's never just about the food. The table is the place where strangers become friends—offering our lives to one another and taking the extension of another person into our very bodies to be digested and transformed into new life.

The experience at Hinton Rural Life Center was planted in my heart in ways that would produce fruit years later. Today, I push my students to disrupt the geography of our belonging, which inevitably includes dinner tables. It's the place where all of our poverty is transformed into richness.

When Jesus described the kingdom of God, he called it a dinner party. That's the question: "Will you attend God's dinner party?"

Thanks be to God for the Hinton Rural Life Center. Amen.

