Secret Sauce

John 13:31-35

Everyone knows that the secret to great dishes is in the sauce. A great chef can spend years perfecting a single sauce. Although a few secret ingredients can distinguish a sauce and therefore a dish, the base usually starts with a simple roux or base (flour and butter or oil heated together as a thickening agent). Once the roux is established, the rest depends on whatever additional ingredients the chef decides to add. The French in particular have perfected this process.

French cooking begins by learning the 5 “mother” sauces that make up the basis for all French dishes: Béchamel, Velouté, Espagnole, Tomat, and Hollandaise. Once one masters these five, experimentation can begin.

What is thrown into the roux becomes for every well-known chef his or her “signature” sauce. Of course, every chef dreams of discovering that distinguishing taste that wows clients and restauranteurs.

Many of these sauces only last as long as the meal they were intended for. They don’t “keep.” One example is beurre blanc sauce, an extremely tasty sauce made primarily of white vinegar, white wine, shallots, and butter. The sauce is whisked briskly in heating, which prevents separation. The result is a light, heavenly butter sauce exquisite on fish dishes along with lemon and capers.

But try to save that sauce for leftovers, and what you get is a chunky, mushy, sour mess. No matter how you try, that initial moment of tastebud heaven cannot be reconstructed the next day. It’s a once and done affair.

The moment the ingredients separate, the sauce is doomed. The symbiotic relationship is no more.

The real secret to a great recipe? The ability to keep key ingredients in harmony. Endurance over time. Consistency. Reliability. Trustworthiness. Unity.

Indivisibility matters. Integrity matters. The best recipes bring together unlikely ingredients into a unique and beautiful harmony. Great ones endure. Superb ones last. Integrity means that no matter how many times you try it, it tastes as good as the very first time.

It’s no mistake that the Coca Cola company keeps it’s secret recipe locked away in a sealed vault for all eternity. The inventors of the soft drink discovered a mixture that doesn’t endure just for the ecstatic experience of one single sitting but remains consistently tasty day after day, year after year. The success of the brand has proven this truth.

The mixture remains intact. It doesn’t separate. No matter where you buy it or how you experience it, the taste remains unique, consistent, true, and good. You trust the brand, because you know exactly what you are getting when you taste it, no matter how often or how infrequently you imbibe.

For years, this is the way people felt about the Church. No matter where you went, what language you worshipped in, how far you were from home, how long it’s been, you could come to church and experience the same kind of community, familiarity, and feeling of reverence that you remembered from childhood. The people may have changed, the style of worship may be different. The flavor of the music may be unique to that congregation, but the “taste,” the “feel” of the community, the basic tenants of the faith, the feeling of acceptance, the symbiotic reverence was a “brand” you knew you could trust.

It has endured over time from the first century onward. But the Church has also experienced times of disharmony and discord, separation, and diaspora. Even amidst Jesus’ own disciples, one would betray him and cause a rift in the 12. No community, not even Jesus’ own community, has ever been perfectly harmonious all the time throughout time.

Yet despite this acknowledgement, the goal remains: synchrony and community –alternative community, the kind that bonds and endures. And the bonding agent? Love. Love God. Love each other.

It’s the basic tenant of the Jewish shema. It’s the unity of forgiveness we pray for in the Lord’s prayer. It’s what we as Christians say is most important to us. Loving God. And loving each other. Except that “each other” tends to sometimes become conditional, exclusionary, limited, or confined to a minimal space.

Jesus’ intended community to be inclusive. The vision of the early Christian Church was a united global community. But it’s easier said than done. Jesus knew that. That’s what makes discipleship so hard. It’s what makes love so hard.

There’s an old folk saying attributed to Martin Luther that goes, “wherever the Lord builds a church, the devil would build a chapel.”

The threat of what M. Scott Peck calls the “diabolic” in human nature is always evident. As God would say, “sin is crouching at your door, and it’s desire is for you.” Or as Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling stone to me!” Both signify a threat to unity, a diversion away from relationship.

Division and separation are the very definition of the fall of humanity from the garden onward, in which humankind separated from unity and relationship with God and began to live life as a “free agent.”

God’s goal? To return humanity to a state of unity, harmony, relationship, and symphony –a coming into tune with God, into tune with each other, and the world.

Yet this is monumentally hard. Our very existence, our way of understanding life and each other is based in terms of measurement and locating ourselves as “opposed” to others. This is the essence of individualism. Community, though we desire it from the core of our hearts, is challenging for us. Relationships are challenging for us. Anyone want to dispute that one? And yet we continue to seek them, because we were ultimately designed to live in unity, in harmony, “with” one another.

The paradox of humanity.

We are both sympathetic and diabolical. Both tendencies live within us. How we live them out will determine the kind of communities we build.

Why does Jesus put so much emphasis on love? Why does Paul keep emphasizing love, love, love?

Because love is the sealant if you will for sympathy, compassion, community, and unity. Love is the mortar that binds every stone that lies upon the cornerstone that is Jesus.

As soon as love becomes peripheral and something else works its way into our foundation, our edifices begin to crumble and separate. Communities start building walls instead of bridges, barriers instead of entryways.

Love seals. Mistrust divides. Love is Jesus’ secret ingredient. His “secret sauce.”

No matter how hard loving is, it’s the goal that all Christians pursue in order to build the kind of community Jesus intended.

Wherever division exists, seal it with love. Wherever diverse opinions exist, bridge them with love.

Wherever differing worldviews emerge, stretch out a hand in love.

Wherever multiple interpretations are posed, offer up an ear in love.

Wherever difference threatens to divide, remember that love of God unifies all things and all people.

For, as Paul says, “faith, hope, and love abide….But the greatest of these is love.”