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The Blessed Sacrament of Potlucks

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THE BLESSED SACRAMENT OF POTLUCKS

When I was little, my mom had a thing about mall bathrooms. As in, she wouldn't let me go into them alone. Until I was sixteen.

I'm not talking some of the grand malls of the world, no Taj Ma-mall of some Megalopolis. I'm talking the mall in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. At the end of the known world.

This was the early Eighties so maybe Mom had cause to be worried. Malls were by no means new then and had taken over the world, even in out of the way places like Sioux Falls. Subconsciously, everyone knew there was an underbelly to mall culture, that out back by the dumpsters there was a different reality we didn't want to know about.

Or down the long hallway to the mall bathroom.

Far from the façade of warm lights and precisely fitted stone walkways, past the orgy of smells and manipulable manikins, in the place of all that pee and poo, lurked the undesirables. You might as well have had additional wording beneath the "Restrooms" sign that said, "and predators."

At least that's what Mom thought.

Though I live in farm country, I didn't go to a true farmers' market until I was in my twenties. Ironically, it was in an urban area, off a ramp near downtown Minneapolis—the exact type of off ramp that I feared, rural boy that I was, one that led to the tangle of the city that I knew ate white boys like me.

I didn't exactly feel safe in that farmer's' market the first time around, mainly because it was so, well, exotic. There were no walls, just long permanent awnings. On both sides of the long aisle, there were people—not clad in store apparel, like the moving mannequins of malls, but wearing the clothing of the nations: white people in bibbed overalls and straw hats, Asian people in traditional *sinh* skirts, Somali people in hijabs, and everybody in blue jeans, t-shirts, and aprons. They were thin like the lemon grass they sold, or short and squat as the bright purple egg plants, or beautiful with open faces like the fresh cut flowers. They had conversations in bright-voweled Minnesota English, or tonal, syncopated Eastern monosyllables or rolling, musical Spanish that seemed to be one long word going on forever.

I don't remember why we went there, me riding the coattails of my Lao then-girlfriend. We went for nothing in particular; we went for everything, for the bounty of the world.

Later, when I went with my Lao wife to the farmers' market in Savannakhet, Laos, the out-of-control feel of the Minneapolis farmer's market was multiplied by the developing world. There were piles of fresh pineapples and mini bananas. There was fresh jicama to peel and eat. There was meat drawing flies in the heat. My sons took a picture by a gasping Mekong River catfish. My mother-in-law bought us a bag of bugs, slightly buttery if you could get past the chitin-y, leggy texture. There were traditional *sinh*, American t-shirts, wicker everything. There were families. One vendor gently swung his baby in a wicker basket to lull him to sleep. Around another corner, a leper without fingers reached for my son from underneath a table, begging for coins.

In the Savannakhet morning market, I had an attack of diarrhea that drove me to the restroom, a line of squatters with buckets of water set off to one side to clean yourself. The stench was magnified by

the tropical heat. This, too, was an unsafe place, I suppose, one from which I emerged both relieved and utterly human.

I didn't feel safe in either mall bathrooms or the squatters, but in each place it was a different kind of unsafe: the difference between developed and developing unsafety, or between suburban and urban unsafety; the difference between the potential psychosis of a lurker and the tumult of a multitude.

What if churches looked more like urban farmers' markets and less like suburban malls? Of course, the church shouldn't *be* a market. But rather, following Jesus' lead, it should be a house of prayer for all nations. If so, then it should look more like a farmers' market and less like a mall.

It seems the church has a fear of uncontrolled places that might cause helplessness, or embarrassment. Christians seem to fear the vitality and variety that would be "house of prayer for all nations," and stay for the most part in the safety of monoculture, grouping with people that look similar, making churches often look more like malls than like farmers' markets. Christians could engage Muslims in interfaith discourse and make peace, but instead add to the terror of ISIS, with Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock often getting no mention at all. Christians vote against movements that could be threatening, turning inward to personal concerns instead, but even then there are intra-family disputes. The safety of the suburban mall isn't so safe.

Of course, there's a reason for boundaries. A church cannot be everything; it cannot be a market. However, when Christians find the same boundaries of the world within the body of the church, then the church is just imitating the market—or the mall. Talking about the differences between malls and farmers' markets is really a way to talk about the way to draw lines to keep others out in America and the church: segregation, reservations, suburbanization. Christians are quick to fear the relativism of the mall but eternally blind to segregation whether created by law or by self-selection.

But there's also a ready-made solution: the church potluck. As far as I'm concerned, church potlucks are borderline sacrament, a place for the tastes of the market without the pressures.

At our little church a couple of years ago, we got a sampling of the house of prayer for all nations at such a potluck: a hog roast in the park. There were the typical staples (jello salads, cheesy potatoes) but there were also Eastern entries (sticky rice and papaya salad), Latin American dishes (enchiladas and a dish that quickly got marked SPICY!), and of course the whole hog. You could hear Midwestern English being spoken and Spanish and Lao. Ministers prayed in English and Spanish to bless the meal. It was beautiful and delicious.

Now, we have a couple of Iraqi families in town. They're next up to get to a potluck.

In this age of mounting fear, perhaps the church potluck can be the answer. Perhaps, to paraphrase St. Paul somewhat freely, perfect potlucks can drive out fear.