

Welcome to the Picnic, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 09060806
Ephesians 4:1-16 and John 6:24-35
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 6 August, 2006

Last fall, we had a series of gatherings in members' homes as part of our Visioning process. One result of the input from those home meetings is found on the front cover of the worship bulletin this morning. I invite you to say it along with me: "Dedicated to spiritual renewal, we strive to be an accepting, thinking and serving community of faith."

It was a pleasure for me to watch the members of the Vision Team grow in wisdom and faith as they struggled with what it means to be the church. The report of the Vision Team was accepted by the church council. Now the entire congregation will have an opportunity to accept the vision team's report on Sunday, September 10.

The home meetings began with an ice-breaker. We were to choose which of eight images of the church we thought were the most important and which were the least important. It was a difficult task because each of the images had a significant component. Each participant could see the variety of images held in priority by others. The images presented were:

The church is hospital for the hurting

The church is an agency to right the wrongs of society

The church is a club where I can gather with good people

The church is a spiritual battery charger

The church is a stadium in which to watch and wait for Christ's coming

The church is a school to teach the Bible

The church is a life-saving station

The church is a picnic where everyone enjoys the food and fun

Each of those images is valid, but which one holds the highest priority? My vote goes to "the church is a picnic where everyone enjoys the food and fun." That may sound frivolous to you, but hear me out. Each of those words was carefully chosen and is significant.

Think of a picnic you attended that you gave you particular pleasure. Is there anyone here who has never been to a picnic?

I remember going to a family reunion picnic as a child. I saw and spoke with some favorite cousins and I met some relatives I never knew I had. I tried different kinds of food and had my first sip of coffee – yuchh! Everyone was dressed casually, but no one complained about what others wore. We laughed at ourselves when we tried potato sack races, and tossed water balloons. There was friendly coaching and encouraging, and there were no harsh judgments about how others performed. Older men and women and kids all played softball together. The competition wasn't heavy, just fun. I think my father complained about sore muscles the next day.

If the church is like a picnic, we will want to be a part of it. Our spirits will be raised. We will feel as though we belong. We will be fed and nourished. If the church is like a picnic, the other seven images can be fulfilled.

Welcome to a picnic. We don't know who all we're going to see at the picnic, but they all belong. We'll be there with old friends, and we'll make some new ones.

Picnics are never perfect. We expect the sand or the dirt and the flies to be present. Even the ants come! Everybody contributes food or games or something to the picnic. Nobody goes hungry. There is food for everyone, and if you don't like what your mom brought, you can probably get some food from your cousins.

In Ephesians, we see words that acknowledge that all are one in God's Spirit. But, we also see words that seem to be in response to the exact opposite kind of situation. A phrase like, "We must no longer be children – tossed to and from and blown about by every wind of doctrine ..." show a group of people in turmoil. Perhaps they had forgotten their unity because of the things they were fighting about. We see a call to look past the disagreements to what binds us together. "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, mak[e] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."¹

The church is like a picnic. We can overlook our differences to have fun! Nobody complains about how another is dressed. People don't judge how others act. It's heavenly! The one who calls us to come to the picnic is none other than Jesus Christ. He tells us that the picnic we come to here is a foretaste of heaven.

Jesus talked a lot about food and I think he liked picnics. In Matthew, Jesus told a parable describing heaven like a wedding banquet.² In Luke, Jesus defended himself against the Pharisees and scribes who complained about his eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.³ In Mark and Matthew Jesus fed four thousand people.⁴ That sounds like a huge picnic! At another time, Matthew reports that Jesus fed five thousand and had food left over.⁵

And then, there is the big one. "On the night when he was betrayed," he and his friends were eating at a banquet. He "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"⁶ It was like a picnic. Look who was there. There was uncle Matt. He works for the IRS. There were cousins Andrew and James. They run a fishing charter business out of Morehead City. There was uncle Jude. He's a banker. – doesn't pay his tellers very much, but he was there.

Friends, it was a celebration. They told the old family stories about how, by the grace of God, their great grandparents made it through the Red Sea, and how their ancestors staked a claim for the rich pasture land. They said it was literally flowing with milk and honey.

In just a moment, we're going to come to the picnic – or rather the communion table. Jesus invites us to remember those old family stories. According to John, after Jesus fed all those people, he told his disciples, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." This is the food that satisfies. Welcome to the picnic where everyone enjoys the food and fun. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"⁷ No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here!

¹Ephesians 4:2-3

²Matthew 22:2-14

³Luke 5:29

⁴Mark 8:3-9 and Matthew 15:32-38

⁵Matthew 14:14-21

⁶1 Corinthians 11:23-25

⁷John 6:35