

G.U.M.B.O.

preached and cooked on January 3, 2010

Many of the parables of Jesus began with the phrase, “The kingdom of God is like ...” and then he went on to explain the kingdom of God in ways that helped the people have a little better understanding. Well I’ve never been to heaven, but I have been involved in the church for most of my life. And I sometimes wonder how I can better explain the church in a way that would give people a little better understanding of who we are and what we are to be doing. Now there are some aspects of the church that are shared by all congregations. And yet, each congregation is unique, for each congregation has a particular set of gifts, talents, and graces that the Holy Spirit can use to move us forward. So all congregations need to ask, “What is the next step? How can we use our gifts, our talents, and especially our connection with God to move toward where God wants us to be? How can we use what we have to move this community toward the Lord?” Now when each congregation asks and answers those question, a unique destination will be found. And yet in all congregations, though unique, still many of the same ingredients will be found, because we all have the same Lord. So as we begin this new year, what is St. Paul suppose to be? Where are we to go?

I have attended many classes and conferences where we consider who we are to be and how we are to get to where we need to be. On one occasion, Bishop Middleton was talking about the need to develop a vision which uses the unique ingredients of each congregation. And I began to think about the ingredients that we need. As the bishop continued to talk, I thought first about a tossed salad. When we look at a tossed salad, it is easy to see the distinct ingredients. But in a tossed salad each ingredient stands on its own. The lettuce, carrots, cucumber, whatever are all together, and yet they are not really blending with one another. So then I started thinking about some soup, maybe vegetable, but that didn’t sound quite right either. There had to be something more. Then it hit me.

What we need, what we want, is an expansion of God’s kingdom. What we want is an explosion of ministry that is so powerful the congregation can virtually taste it. We want to expand our ministries in Christ. So what we need, is God and U in Ministries that are Busting Out all over the place. What we need is G.U.M.B.O. - GOD and U in MINISTRIES that are BUSTING OUT all over.

I must admit that this sermon has come together over some length of time. When I first cooked in worship, there were some who questioned my sanity, including my wife. I might have been in that crowd, too. But then I read in the Link, our conference newspaper, an article written by Jerry Wolgemuth, our director of communications, about how we need to bring into the sanctuary the excitement that we see in the kitchen on the Food Network. We need to kick things up a notch. Being a fan of Emeril Lagasse and the Iron Chef, I readily agreed, and I

considered that article to be a validation of this ridiculous idea to bring you GUMBO - God and U in Ministries that are Busting Out all over.

So where do we begin with our GUMBO. Well everything begins with the grace of God. John Wesley even talks about prevenient grace, that is the grace of God that is present in our world even before we come to God. And when I think about that grace, in food form, I turn to oil, particularly olive oil. Remember the 23rd Psalm, *“Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”* (Psalm 23:5b)

With that oil we need to anoint humanity. But how did humanity begin? Genesis 3:19b: *“for dust you are and to dust you will return.”* So to the grace of God we are going to add the flour dust of humanity. You might notice in doing that, that even though they are in equal amounts, the oil overwhelms the flour, for grace overwhelms our life. And as we mix them together we need to add God’s love. You may remember that in Hebrews 12:29 it says, *“God is a consuming fire.”* So with God’s love we heat humanity mixed with the grace of God until it begins to color and flavor everything that it touches. In cooking, this is called a roux. But in our spiritual journey, it is the start of mission and ministry. God’s love and grace poured on us, warming our hearts, our spirits, our souls. That is the basis of all we do.

Now when we make this roux, we have to allow some time to enable everything to come together. If you make this, don’t use more than a medium, or medium low heat, and know that it will take about 20 minutes until it becomes a chocolate brown color. So I prepared my roux before so we wouldn’t be here all morning.

One thing that we want in our ministry is the fullness of God. To me that means the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But there are various trinities. In southern cooking, which this is, the trinity is onions, peppers, and celery. Again we allow it to come upon the mixture of humanity and grace and allow the flavors of life to build and grow. Notice that at this point, all that is going on has a whole lot more to do with God than it does with us. That needs to be true in our life, in our faith, and in our ministries as well.

Where do we go next? I remember what Jesus said in Matthew 15:9, *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”* We don’t want Jesus to say that about us and so we add our heart. In our cooking, the heart is represented by tomatoes, and so we have to put that into our mix. And following our heart we need to include our experiences and our memories. And that means garlic. Why? It comes from Numbers 11:5: *“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost Also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.”* After all, when we come to Christ we do not leave our memories, our experiences behind us. We carry

those with us. In fact, God will have us use our memories and experiences in fulfilling our call to mission and ministry.

Now when Christ came to us we were not worthy of compassion, much less his sacrifice. And when we come to him we can leave nothing behind. We must come just as we are, wholly and completely. Matter of fact, Jesus told us that if we are not prepared to come to him with everything we have, and everything we are, don't bother. Luke 9:62: "*Jesus replied, >No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*" "We can't come to Christ and look back. We have to look to him and come to him with all we've got. So we toss in both our sweetness and our sins. The sweetness is represented by corn, and our sins are seen in black beans. It can be any beans but I like black beans. Both go in as we continue to build our mission of G.U.M.B.O.

We are building one heck of a ministry here, but we still have to kick it up a notch. What else do we need? Jesus said "*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*" (Matthew 5:13) We don't want to lose our saltiness, our gospel so to speak, so we need to add salt. And we also put in a bit of pepper simply because it goes with the salt. And in John 10:10, Jesus told us that "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" Abundance of life is the essence of what Jesus gives us. Now this is a poor substitute for that, but we add the Essence of Emeril. In your gumbo you can add whatever spices you want, but this is mine and the essence of life is a must.

And always remember that all of this is possible only because of the sacrifice, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We are washed in his blood. To remind ourselves of that we add some red hot sauce. And because we are called to continually move toward Christ, to grow in Christ, we add a little green hot sauce, just to kick it up a notch.

This is pretty good so far. As it says in Genesis 8, a pleasing odor, a sweet smell was lifted up to the Lord. But still there is something missing, and that is the people that we have to touch; those who need a little grace, a little healing, a little love in their life. There are people who have been through the grinder in life and so we add sausage. Others have been smoked and flattened by fires of persecution, abuse, oppression, and addiction. For them we add some bacon. And still others think that they are too insignificant for anyone to care about. But because nothing is too small for God's love and grace, we add some shrimp.

Under the heading of truth in advertizing, I had cooked the sausage and bacon earlier. The shrimp was not cooked, but it was seasoned with a little Old Bay. I am also adding herbs, because while talking to Pharisees, Jesus said, "*Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love*

of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.” (Luke 11:42) Well we do have God’s love in this process already, and we are working toward justice, but we do not want to neglect the various herbs. Accordingly, we add some chopped parsley and a couple of bay leaves. (Remember to take the bay leaves out before you serve this.)

Our ministry now has most of the ingredients in place, but it is not over yet. In Luke 18:1 we read, *“Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray all the time and never give up.”* Prayer has to be a constant part of our life and of our ministry. We need to be constantly soaking this mission in prayer. My personal translation is that Jesus tells us to be of an attitude of prayer. Prayer needs to permeate every aspect of our life. Virtually every breath needs to be a prayer lifted up to God. And in our G.U.M.B.O., prayer is represented by broth. The type of broth does not matter. It is just that everything needs to be covered by prayer.

We are just about finished. This does need to keep soaking in the prayers of all of us. We need to have all these ingredients blend with the love and grace of God. And in the process, each pot, each ministry will have its own unique flavor, just like all our ministries will be somewhat unique. And yet there is something generic in all of them. But the point is that this ministry, this mission, this vision needs to feed our souls and spirits. That is not only for those of us in the church, but even more so for those outside the church. They need some divine nourishment. So as we think about feeding souls and expanding spirits, we add some rice. The rice will expand, will absorb all the flavors and grace that they can hold. Add a little Bread of Life and we are ready to go.

Maybe after the service you can taste some of this, if you desire. It will be taken to Fellowship Hall where small portions will be served. But what is the point of all this. A couple of things. Paul wrote that *“Every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you tell about the Lord’s death until he comes.”* (1 Corinthians 11:26) Well the Lord is coming and we need to tell the world. And Jesus said that when we eat the bread and drink of the cup we are to remember him, his sacrifice and his resurrection. In the same way, every time you eat or drink, every time you cook or see someone cooking, I hope that you remember Jesus and the mission and ministry that we are to be doing in his name. And thinking of this demonstration, I hope you also think about our next step, individually and collectively, in reaching out to the community around us. Because before us is the story of our journey in life and faith; a story that is waiting to be written; waiting for us to build the ministry, waiting for us to cook up new dreams and schemes of where God will lead us, and of how God’s kingdom will grow in us and through us. It is time to feed the world on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is time to bring our G.U.M.B.O. to life. God and U in Ministry, Busting Out all over the place. May you go forth to make it so, now and forever. Amen.