

NINETEEN

Methodist Dance Party

People who love to eat are always the best people.

—Julia Child

I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS HUNGRY.

In the midst of grappling with the failure of the Mission, I experienced some modest professional success with the publication of my second book, which sent me travelling around the country speaking at colleges, churches, and conferences about the church, Bible, gender equality, and media. This new itinerate lifestyle provided the perfect cover for not looking for a new church—how could we when we weren't even in town most weekends?—and distracted me from the nagging emptiness that accompanies a dream deferred. It also reintroduced me to the people of the church universal, who, at a time when I felt like a religious orphan, welcomed me, supported me, listened to me, and, of course, fed me.

The Methodists of Jackson, Tennessee, served barbecue and coleslaw at their women's retreat. The Baptists of Houston, Texas, brought in food trucks so we could picnic over Tex-Mex on the church lawn. I threw back shots of tequila with a van full of Presbyterian pastors as our taxi sped along the coastline of Cozumel, Mexico. I tried the iced cowboy coffee at Common Grounds in Waco, while a gaggle of Baylor University students waited for the thumbs-up.

In Grand Rapids, a reader named Caroline handed me a stack of salted dark chocolate chip cookies tied up in a baby-blue bow, which made such an impression I now know the recipe by heart. In Seattle, Pastor Tim and his husband Patrick served up fresh salmon with avocado mango salsa, asparagus, quinoa, and local red wine. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, a guinea pig farmer welcomed our team of World Vision bloggers into her one-room home with meal of boiled potatoes, which we passed around like communion bread. In Holland, Michigan, the Dutch Reformed grilled up hot dogs and hamburgers and sent me home with a pair of wooden shoes.

I shared homemade bread and jam with the Quakers of

Portland, shrimp and grits with the Wesleyan Foundation of Williamsburg, macaroni and cheese with the Mennonites of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and melt-in-your-mouth roasted chicken and mashed potatoes with the Dominican nuns of Siena Heights. The Free Methodists of Greenville, Illinois, introduced me to Adam Brothers homemade chicken noodle soup, for which I still get insatiable cravings whenever I'm sick. The Disciples of Christ took me to my first In-N-Out Burger, where I pretended to have the religious experience they expected. I even ate blueberry pancakes at the White House, where, at the annual Easter Prayer Breakfast, civil rights leader Otis Moss gave the best sermon on resurrection I've ever heard in my life. I dined with rocket scientists and musicians, Bible scholars and activists, rabbis and priests, monks and nuns, the homeless and the wealthy, professional chefs and home cooks. I may have gained a few pounds.

"Food is a language of care," writes Shauna Niequist, "the thing we do when traditional language fails."⁴⁵

The end of the Mission felt like something of a death, and whether these good people knew it or not, they were caring for me in my grief. In exchange, I delivered some passable sermons and lectures and tried to answer people's questions during panel discussions and Q&As. Not a single group was rude or inattentive, but sometimes I felt in over my head. Like the time I had to tell a room full of Presbyterian seminarians I did not in fact have an opinion about *supersessionism* because I had no idea what *supersessionism* is. (They seemed to find this response acceptable, as Presbyterians generally oppose *supersessionism*, which I take to mean they're against Texas leaving the union.) Or the time I realized, a little too late, that Churches of Christ and United Church of Christ are not, in fact, the same denomination . . . not by a long shot.

But never did my insecurities rage more violently than when I was asked to speak at youth events. Though much has changed since the Chubby Bunny days, youth events remain the *pièce de résistance* of extrovert culture. There are strobe lights and fog machines, skits and talent contests, rope courses and altar calls and games. Hundreds of teenagers bounce to the throbbing pulse of theologically questionable worship songs while the back-row boys look on. Ankles will be broken. Romances will be kindled. T-

shirts will be shot from cannons. At some point, a guy wearing skinny jeans and a dozen rubber wristbands will jump on the stage and tell everyone in the audience to find someone they don't know and give them a giant Jesus-hug. When I am introduced, he will say, "Rachel Held Evans is here to BLOW YOUR MIND!"

I will not blow their minds.

"Honestly, teenagers aren't my typical audience," I told the youth pastors who called to invite me to speak.

"Yes, but you've got a very popular blog," they said.

"You realize my last post was a three thousand-word discussion on biblical regulations regarding menstruation, right? I don't have a ton of suitable material for middle school boys."

"Well maybe don't talk about your period."

"You sure you want me to do this?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you assure me there will be no fog machines?"

"I'm afraid we've already ordered them."

One such conversation led me to Eagle Eyrie, a four hundred-acre wooded camp in Lynchburg, Virginia, where youth from the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church have been holding their annual fall retreat for decades. I was asked to speak at all four of the main sessions, to around five hundred junior high and high school students, around the theme of "Living the Questions."

As the first group of students streamed out of their church vans like ants from a disturbed bed, I marveled at their young faces and worried fresh over my severe lack of cool. It occurred to me that the youngest of these students had been toddlers on September 11, 2001. Toddlers! What made me think we were even asking the same questions?

I spent the week leading up to the conference reworking all my usual material, calling Brian Ward for advice, and scouring the Internet to see what the kids are into these days.

"Be sure to be funny," my friends said. "Teenagers like funny."

"Work in some pop culture references," they said. "Talk about

music and movies they know.”

“Don’t even think about using PowerPoint!”

“It’s best not to stick with a script.”

“You’ve got exactly fifteen minutes before you lose them. Whatever you do, don’t go over.”

“Just don’t try too hard,” Brian warned. “They see right through that. They know when you’re faking it.”

So I just had to be funny, hip, and concise—without really trying. Got it.

Despite all the preparation, I panicked when I took the stage after the band finished the first night, streams of water vapor still clinging to the set, five hundred young faces looking back at me. Before I approached the microphone, I closed my eyes and prayed: *God, just help me do right by these kids, just help me do right by these kids, just help me do right by these kids.* After a few seconds of silence, I cleared my throat, chuckled nervously, and confessed I was a little nervous. No faking it, right?

The first presentation went okay. The students laughed at my jokes and only a few fell asleep. I didn’t talk about my period. And as the weekend went on, I started to get the hang of things. I learned the students’ names and listened to their feedback. I developed a friendly banter with some of the older kids, especially the boys who were surprised to get permission from their female chapel speaker to interrupt the next session with an update on the Alabama football game.

The climax of the weekend happened on Saturday night with a communion service for all the students, volunteers, chaperones, and ministers. A Methodist pastor presided over the table, but asked me and a few of the student leaders to help distribute the bread and wine.

As I stood at the front of the rustic camp meeting room, holding a loaf of bread in one hand and tearing off a piece at a time with the other, hundreds of people approached, one at a time, with their hands held out, ready to receive.

“This is Christ’s body, broken for you,” I said.

I said it over and over again, to each person who came to the table—to the back-row boys who avoided my gaze, to the girls whose mascara rivered down their cheeks, to the kids who giggled in line with their friends, to the ones who came all alone.

This is Christ's body, broken for you.

I said to the ones wearing designer jeans, to ones with beat-up shoes, to the ones I could tell were athletes, to the ones who were clearly the class clowns, to the ones who probably got picked on in school.

This is Christ's body, broken for you.

I said it to the skinny girl who reached for a hug, the youth leader with tired red eyes, the chaperones who mouthed words of thanks.

This is Christ's body, broken for you.

I said it to the boy who approached with his walker, the jock who grinned and whispered "Roll Tide," the mom who told me she sent a letter of complaint to the UMC when she heard I was going to be the speaker.

This is Christ's body, broken for you.

There were wrinkled hands and pierced noses and flashes of brilliant white teeth against chocolate skin. There were babies on hips, Band-Aids on fingers, hands in pockets, nervous shuffles, and teary eyes.

This is Christ's body, broken for you.

In the faces that passed by I saw joy, relief, anxiety, boredom, shyness, familiarity, distraction, and hope. I saw broken families, fights with friends, doubts about God, and insecurities about the van ride home.

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I said it more than three hundred times—until at last I believed it, at last I understood: it wasn't my job to do right by these kids; this wasn't about me at all. I could only proclaim the great mystery of

faith—that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again, and that somehow, some way, this is *enough*. This body and this blood is *enough*.

At Eagle Eyrie I learned why it's so important for pastors to serve communion. It's important because it steals the show. It's important because it shoves you and your ego and your expectations out of the way so Jesus can do his thing. It reminds you that grace is as abundant as tears and faith as simple as food.

“When [Jesus] wanted fully to explain what his forthcoming death was all about,” writes New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, “he didn’t give a theory. He didn’t even give them a set of scriptural texts. He gave them a meal.”⁴⁶

I guess sometimes you just have to taste and see.

After the service, we celebrated with a light show and dance party, because that's how the Methodists roll. I busted out my worst dance moves to the cheers of the students, wholly unconcerned about my lack of cool. Somewhere between the choruses of “We Are Young” and “Call Me Maybe,” I realized how much I needed these teenagers from Virginia, the ones I had once thought needed me. Communion has a way of flattening things out like that, a way of entangling our roots and joining our hands.

On the days when I am hungry—for community, for peace, for belief—I remember what it was like to feed people Jesus, and for people to feed Jesus to me. And those pieces of memory multiply, like the bread that fed the five thousand, spilling out of their baskets and filling every hollow space. Communion doesn't answer every question, nor does it keep my stomach from rumbling from time to time, but I have found that it is enough. It is always and ever enough.