

Table Grace

communion meditation

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Deuteronomy 8:1-3; John 6:24-35

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How many times have we met him here? Here, breaking bread at his table? If we think about it, it's hard to imagine his ministry apart from the table. Whether it was the table of Zaccheas or Martha and Mary, a table in the home of a high ranking religious official or with his followers along the road to Emmaus, whether it was a makeshift table in the quiet of early morning on the seashore or the improvised table that fed a tumultuous multitude ranging across a mountainside, a table set in the festive precincts of a wedding feast or the table laden with the heaviness of the Last Supper, the table figures prominently in the telling of Jesus' story. It was a place of communion, but it was also more. It was a place where by word and example the wideness and the fullness of God's Kingdom came to life.

Isn't it interesting that of all the miracles ascribed to Jesus by the Gospels, the Feeding of the Multitude is the only miracle reported by all four? Mark and Matthew recount it twice, leaving us to wonder if they are recalling two different events or retelling the same story. Although it's there in the background of each of the stories, John's version in particular links back to God's provision of manna to the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings. Remember manna? The Hebrew, *man hu*, literally means "What is it?" Bedouin peoples living in the Sinai Peninsula today still gather and bake it into bread. An excretion of plant lice which feed on local tamarisk trees, it is a yellowish-white flake or ball of juice, rich in carbohydrates and sugars. Now, as then, it decays quickly and attracts ants so that gatherers have to restrict themselves to daily portions. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Recalled today in the celebration of Passover, the Deuteronomist points to manna as one of the many evidences of God's gracious provision during the wilderness wanderings; and Nehemiah, quoted in today's reading from John, speaks of it as "bread from heaven." The rabbis came to believe that manna from heaven would be a sign of the Messianic Age; and John clearly seems to see Jesus' feeding of the multitude just prior to today's reading as that very sign as he recounts the story utilizing the liturgical language and actions reminiscent of the Lord's Supper. Lifting the bread on the mountainside, Jesus "took," "blessed," "broke," and "gave" the bread to the people. For John and the eyes of faith, this simple, ordinary bread fulfilled the purpose that every Eucharist the church would celebrate through the centuries would serve—a sign of the mystery of God's gracious and all-sufficient presence in the Christ.

Historically, the church has turned a jaundiced eye upon the Jewish people who, in Christ's very presence, failed to recognize who he was. We, with John, speak with utter consternation, wondering how they could not see the long awaited signs right before their eyes. Historically, the church has been myopic, clattering about the splinter in the eye of its Jewish neighbor and failing to recognize the beam in its own eye.

How could *they* not have seen? How could *we* not have seen? Gathering for centuries around this sacred Table, how could we in Christ's church have become so focused on splitting hairs over who and who is not welcome here? Or so divided over defining what transpires within the bread and the wine themselves that we have failed to ask what happens here to us?

Hear the plaintiff note in Jesus' chastisement of the crowd, who came looking for him, "not because [they had seen] signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves." To put it bluntly, they had seen in Jesus a meal ticket and nothing more. But before you get too censorious, be sure to hear the plaintiff note of Jesus words to his own disciples, shown immediately after Jesus' exchange with crowd, grumbling about the difficulty of his teaching: "Does this offend you?" Jesus asks. Mark puts Jesus' words more starkly. Boarding a boat in order to get a respite from the crowd, the disciples, Mark ominously mentions, are tied in knots because *they had forgotten the bread*. Jesus, dismayed by their short sightedness and low expectations, asks in seeming exasperation, "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" [8:18].

The disciples had experienced phenomenal events bearing evidence of the bounty of God's grace, and yet here they were *having forgotten the bread* and tied in knots. "How many baskets were left over after I fed the 5000?" Jesus asks. "Twelve," the disciples reply. "How many when I fed the 4000?" "Seven." "*Do you not yet understand?*" he cries [Mk. 8:19-21].

Each year, the National Farm Workers Ministry tells us, two to three million migrant and immigrant farm workers and their families labor in our nation's agricultural fields. Since 85% of US fruit and vegetable crops are harvested by hand, the contribution these workers make to putting food on our tables is significant. Their pay and their living and working conditions, however, are deplorable.

A farm worker's average annual income is \$11,000 a year, and estimates range as high as 10% for US farm workers who are forced to work without pay in "debt slavery." Workers are often paid by the bucket, called "piece rate." Paid in some states as little as 40¢ per bucket of tomatoes or sweet potatoes, workers must pick two tons of produce (125 buckets) to

earn \$50.

Most major US labor laws (such as those governing minimum wage, overtime, workers' compensation and protection when joining unions) are different for farm workers or exclude them altogether. Most workers are immigrants who, without legal protections, fear firing or deportation if they complain.

Recognizing that we spend significantly less of our incomes on food than do people in other industrialized countries, people of different faiths across our nation are joining hands in the National Farm Workers Ministry to seek a "harvest of justice" for our workers.

Can we afford it? Is there enough bread to go around? Raising the question here at this table, you can almost hear again the cry: "*Do you not yet understand?*" Table grace, you see, spills over and goes far beyond anything we might ever have dreamed.

Feed the hungry? Provide excellence in education and hope for the future for all of our children? Extend health care so that all of our citizens have access to quality medical care?

Fighting words? Conversation we have to keep out of church lest it divide us?

Oh God, I pray not. Given the angry words that are displacing civil conversation in our society today, if this can't be the place where we can talk about things that matter most, things that are a matter of life and death for so many people, then where on earth can it happen? The "how to" in terms of the specifics of programs and how the budget is worked out are matters on which we do not have to agree. But the motivation, the certainty that love compels us to find a way—that is appropriate to this place and to this table of grace. This table graces our lives and commissions us to become grace for the world in which we live.

If it can't happen here, in and among us, then where on earth *can* it happen?