

Matthew 14:13-21 The Feast
August 6, 2023

One of the rituals of our faith tradition is a meal that is called Communion, or the Lord's Supper. It is, of course, a memorial of the Last Supper, shared between the twelve disciples and Jesus on the night of his betrayal, arrest, and the next day, trial and execution.

In that meal, which was most likely a Jewish Passover, Jesus re-interpreted its meaning from a backwards look at the Exodus from Egypt to his own future passion, resurrection, and later return. He likened the bread they shared to *his* body, and the wine to *his* blood, and made them a symbol of union with Christ, which is by extension, union with God. The symbol is powerful, of taking in spiritual nourishment.

One remembers the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, when he spoke of himself as, "Living Water," or as possessing it anyway. And also his claim to be the, "Bread of Life," two Eucharistic images from the Gospel of John.

But this ritual and the meal upon which it is based is not the only culinary example in the Bible. One thinks of the Passover meal itself, with the unleavened bread and the manna and quail that were given to the people while they were in the wilderness.

And to skip ahead to the New Testament, and aforementioned forward look, in terms of gospel

chronology; one also thinks of the parables about wedding feasts; the one about the invited guests that refused to come and the general invitation given even to the outcasts in the community. He told, as well, the parable of the ten bridesmaids, half of which ran out of oil for their lamps and were away shopping when the groom finally arrived to usher them into the feast.

One of the chief images of the Return of Christ is the heavenly banquet, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb at the consummation of the age.

In addition to the biblical references, dining together and sharing meals has always been a part of the life of the church, both in terms of the ritual of Communion, and private settings in which believers get together socially, and as well, church fellowship meals. These are more than simply meals. Not only do we share food, and fellowship, we share Christ.

So it is not very surprising that right in the middle of the story of the ministry of Jesus, the time between the baptism and the passion, there is an event which becomes part, at least, of the center, it is the turning point; before which things were heading towards it, afterwards, things were heading away, that is also a meal. It is the Feeding of the Multitude.

You know the story. Jesus and his disciples had sought some time away, but the people pursued them. He was struck by compassion for them because they were sick, and he healed them.

One wonders about this aspect of the story. The people were not just taking an afternoon off for a little rest and recreation, a stroll in the park on a beautiful August afternoon. What *were* all those people doing out there following Jesus, 5,000 men plus the women and children? There is an implication of distress.

Late in the day it became obvious that it was time to eat. Those with Jesus suggested the people be released to find food, but Jesus fed them instead, with five loaves of bread and two fish. Symbolically, after everyone had enough to be full, they picked up twelve baskets of leftovers, signifying both the nation of Israel with its twelve tribes, and the church with its twelve apostles.

Then the story turns, making the Feeding of the Multitude, along with walking on the water and the confession of Peter, all taken together, the central event in the ministry of Jesus. Before it, Jesus was popular and led a movement that continued to grow.

Afterwards, there was increasing trouble, conflict with the Pharisees and other religious leaders, troubling statements about arrest and execution, people began to leave the movement, eventually he would be completely abandoned by everyone, including his closest followers; accused, tried, executed; alone. In the middle of it all, a meal shared.

The power of a meal as an illustration stems from the actual reality that eating is essential for life in this life. When we eat we take in the required nourishment,

without which we could not survive. And eating happens in community, so it is not surprising that people normally eat in groups, some are never alone.

The community involves every part of the economic set of exchanges that make food accessible. Eating happens in community with God as well because part of the situation involves the natural processes associated with creation, without which there would be no possibility of nourishment. We should never take any of this for granted.

One of the Christian habits is to pray a prayer of thanksgiving before each meal. We might think of the Lord's Supper as a prayer of thanksgiving before the great feast of life. Sometimes we skip over this little ritual. Many eliminate it from their routines altogether.

The more one thinks about it, the less failing to express gratitude when eating a meal makes any sense. So much has to happen, to go right, to produce and distribute the food we eat, it doesn't just magically appear on the shelves at the grocery store; things over which we have little control.

This illustration is of the spiritual life, the imagination is compelled towards reflection about from whence our lives have come, and what they mean, and where they are going.

In the middle of the gospel story there is a great meal, and it is for a multitude. What Jesus offers here is the proclamation by action that all of life . . . not just the

part that involves feeding the body . . . is a miracle of the grace of God shared.

That is, it is the gift of God. And it is the will of God that the multitude takes part . . . and along with them we are nourished in every way, not only in the way that food nourishes, but in the ways relationships nourish, and in the way a relation to God nourishes; together, all of us, in Christ's name:

Through the providing of life's basic needs
Through the healing of the body
Through the healing of the soul
Through the forgiveness of sin

We are all healthier in community, so also through both the hope and the actuality of reconciliation, and through everything it means to share life with each other, and others generally.

The modern world has championed the individual life, personal freedom. But the quintessential individual is alone like Jesus was at the end. Complete solitariness is unhealthy, just like on the other end, losing oneself in the identity of a group is also unhealthy.

So as Jesus gathered the multitude out in the country and insisted that they be fed together there, so God has gathered us here, and many others in other places, to share this blessed feast of human beings in communion with Christ, this feast of life, reconciled to God.

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