

MEETING JESUS AT THE TABLE

A Lenten Study

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*With gratitude to my husband, Fred Holper,
who taught me how to minister at the Lord's Table
and how to be a better cook.*

— Cynthia

*With gratitude to my spouse and son,
Kimberlee and Brennen Burns,
who cared for and sustained me as my illness persisted
through the development of this book.*

— Kevin[†]

*For First Presbyterian Church
of Owensboro, Kentucky,
where I first saw Christ's Table come to life.*

— Christine

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Introduction

COME TO THE TABLE

A Lenten Bible Study

LENT IS A JOURNEY, THE END OF WHICH IS THE death and resurrection of Christ. It is a season in which we are invited to reflect on the immensity of God's love made known in Jesus and his victory over sin, evil, and death. In Lent we are invited to recall what it means to be disciples, followers of Jesus, each and every day. In the last days of Jesus' life, he sat at a table sharing

the Passover meal with his closest friends and connecting the ancient story of God's liberating power with himself. After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples began to gather regularly to break bread in his memory and to experience him in their midst. We do the same thing today. But the upper room was not the only time Jesus was at table or told stories about tables. In this study, we invite you to consider some of these table stories and to reflect on them as we come to the Lord's Table together in this Lenten season.

“This is the joyful feast of the people of God! People will come from north and south, and from east and west to sit at table in the kingdom of God.”¹

These words are often used to invite us to the Lord's Table. They call us to imagine that, when we gather for the Lord's Supper, we are part of something much bigger than our particular congregation or community. This is a Table that stretches around the world and across time. Regardless of the season of the church year or

1. Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 26.

the occasion of the service, this meal is one of celebration and joy. The meal we share at the Lord's Table is one in which a small amount of food provides deep nourishment for the soul. At this Table, there is always room for whoever shows up, and there is always enough for all to be fed. Breaking and sharing bread has been at the heart of Christian worship since the beginning and remains so today. Even though all Christians are not yet able to share the Lord's Supper together officially, the Table remains a symbol of our anticipated unity with one another and with Christ.

The New Testament doesn't tell us much about how the Lord's Supper was observed in the earliest church, but stories about tables are everywhere in the Gospels. Jesus tells stories about banquets, and he goes to a lot of dinner parties. He eats with religious leaders and shady characters. He feeds a hungry crowd and tells his followers to do the same. In this study, we invite you to explore some of the stories about Jesus and tables and, through them, to reflect on how tables shape our identity as followers of Christ.

Just as the Lord's Table stands at the center of Christian worship, so gathering with others to share a meal is at the heart of the human experience. Eating food sustains our bodies. Eating with others creates community and sustains our spirits. Feasting and the preparation and sharing of special foods is part of every religious tradition and most cultures as well. Many families have their own traditions about foods that are always eaten on certain occasions (chili on Christmas Eve or barbecue on the Fourth of July or that special dessert for each family member's birthday). Even though the church potluck supper is a thing of the past in many congregations, faith communities still find ways to combine food and fellowship.

For some people, however, eating is neither communal nor pleasurable. Those who live alone often struggle with mealtimes because they are occasions of loneliness rather than community. Many in this world, indeed many in our own communities, are "food insecure." They simply do not have adequate resources to provide food for themselves or their families. And even more people live in "food deserts,"

neighborhoods where fresh, nourishing produce and protein are nearly impossible to find. When food and eating become metaphors for God's reign, it is as much about justice as it is about spiritual nourishment.

We—Christine, Cynthia, and Kevin—have chosen the following Gospel readings because they represent a range of stories about food and feasting from the life and teaching of Jesus. The idea for this book was suggested by Christine, inspired by a sermon series conversation in an online group called Young Clergy Women International. Cynthia has written the meditations for chapters 1 and 2, 6 and 7 (Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday). Christine has written chapters 3 through 5 and 8 (the meditation for Easter). Each meditation is introduced by a visual interpretation of that particular story by architect and biblical teacher Kevin Burns. You will find his own reflections on how the text sparked his imagination at the end of each chapter.

This study can be used in a variety of ways: for individual meditation or as a springboard for group study and conversation. There are questions for reflection and discussion at the end of

each chapter to help you enter into and engage these stories with us, and a guide for church leaders in the back with suggestions for using this study as a sermon series and in other ministries of the congregation.

Lent is a season for deepened reflection on the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. It is also a time for us to reflect on what it means to be called to follow Jesus in our own lives individually and as communities of faith. We hope that these table stories draw you closer to Christ and to one another as the body of Christ and that you will always be able to recognize him in the breaking and sharing of bread.

Kevin Burns
Cynthia Campbell
Christine Coy Fohr



Chapter 1

DINING ALFRESCO

The Feeding of the Multitude

READ: MARK 6:30–44

And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties.

—Mark 6:38–40

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN HUNGRY? *REALLY* HUNGRY? I acknowledge that I am among those in this world who are incredibly privileged; perhaps you are too. I’ve occasionally had a growling stomach, but I have always known that I could and would, sooner or later, get enough to eat. I’ve never known life-threatening hunger for food. But I have been famished for hope, for

courage, for companionship. Maybe you have too. Perhaps you have also experienced a deep and abiding hunger for meaning and purpose, for a second chance, a fresh start, for forgiveness, for love.

Stories about hunger and food are all over the Bible. As this study suggests, many of the most significant events in Jesus' ministry occur when he is at a dinner table. When the Bible tells stories about hunger or uses food and drink (bread and wine) as metaphors for God's presence, the backdrop is real hunger. The Bible emerged out of the lives of people who were often food insecure. Most of the people in Galilee in Jesus' day were one step away from hunger: one bad harvest, one season of warfare, one disaster or another. People were starving. No wonder food and eating became metaphors for God's providential care and promise.

There are a half-dozen incidents from the life of Jesus that are told by all four of the Gospels—and his birth isn't even one of them. The feeding of the multitude in the wilderness is; in fact, this story occurs six times, because Mark and Matthew tell essentially the same story

twice (just with different numbers of attendees). Thus, our first story of Jesus “at table” isn’t a table at all, but a picnic, and the crowd is huge. Behind it, of course, is another story of wilderness, hunger, and bread.

Drought, crop failure, and famine were the things that got the descendants of Abraham and Sarah to Egypt in the first place. Modern-day refugees from natural disasters cross borders in search of a way to make a living. In just the same way, the twelve sons of Jacob and their families migrated from the land of Canaan to Egypt in search of food and work. After generations in that land, the people of Israel found themselves enslaved to the Egyptians, but at least they had food. Then, Moses was sent to lead them from slavery to freedom. Once they escaped into the wilderness, the Israelites were free, but they were famished. Like hungry children everywhere, they complained: “You could have left us to die in Egypt. At least we would have had food to eat!”

God knew their hunger, just as God knew and heard and felt their suffering in slavery. And so, quail appeared in the evening, and in the

morning there was white stuff on the ground that could be gathered and eaten. “What is it?” they asked, *Manhu?* in Hebrew, which becomes our word “manna” (Exod. 16:1–15). What is it? It is what it is. Bread from heaven. Bread in the wilderness. Food at the moment of greatest insecurity. Food that keeps body and soul together. The bread of life.

This story is told over and over again in the Hebrew Bible. It is sung in the Psalms and called to mind by the prophets. Deeply embedded in the memory and imagination of Jesus and all his ancestors, it clearly stands behind each story of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness.

Every version begins the same way. A large crowd has followed Jesus out to a hillside away from the surrounding villages. They are there to hear him teach. They are drawn by what he says and by stories that invite them to a deeper, larger life with God. They are drawn as well by the things he does, especially his embrace of illness that turns into healing and restoration. Nearing the end of the day, they are still hungry, and Jesus knows that people need food—for both body and soul. The details in the stories

vary, but from somewhere (from someone in the crowd or perhaps the disciples themselves) food is found: five loaves and two fish. In Jesus' hands and with his blessing, this meager meal feeds a multitude, and then the disciples collect the leftovers: twelve baskets of abundance.

The COVID pandemic taught us a lot about hunger. It reminded us that food isn't just about eating. A meal isn't merely consuming the calories needed to sustain life. Food is meant to be shared. Meals are things that bring people together and create relationships. On the one hand, those of you who live in families may have had more meals together than you have had in years. On the other hand, those who live alone experienced the profound absence of companionship—others with whom to share bread. After six months of eating all our meals in our apartment by ourselves, my husband and I formed a “pod” of safety with another couple who lives nearby. In the fall of 2020, we ate a few meals off tray tables outside on their patio. But the first time we shared a meal together inside at the dining room table, we were all in

tears. It was truly the joyful feast of the people of God.

The pandemic also revealed to us that many people in the United States are one step away from food insecurity. When so much of the economy shut down in the spring and summer of 2020, people lined up at food distribution sites. Long lines of people in nice cars drove through church parking lots to get a couple bags of groceries. Especially with schools closed and free breakfasts and lunches gone, it turns out that lots of families in this nation live very close to the edge where food is concerned. For many in those lines, anxiety was compounded by shame. More than one person said, “We used to be people who bought extra food to take to food banks, and now here we are.” Personally, I find this deeply troubling. In one of the richest nations on earth, it just doesn’t seem right that so many people could be so close to being hungry. Surely, we can do better as a nation. Surely, we want to do better.

The research office of our denomination asked Presbyterians what they missed most about in-person worship. The most frequent response was “Communion.” Eating a piece of

bread and sipping a little wine at home just isn't the same, it turns out. We may not consume much food, but when we come to the Table at church, it is a real meal because it is shared with one another in the presence of the One who said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

Lent is a season when many Christians practice some sort of fasting. Abstaining from food as a way of focusing one's attention on God is both an ancient and widespread practice. The roots of the Christian practice are in the worship of Israel, where fasting was often urged as a sign of the people's intention to return to God's ways and renew their promise to be God's covenant people. Fasting remains a part of Jewish worship, especially on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Many Muslims fast during the daytime for Ramadan, a month-long time of spiritual renewal and recommitment. For some Christians, the practice of fasting is a practice of self-denial that helps one identify with the suffering of Christ. Others see it as a way to recognize our sin and our need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Fasting is neither a weight-loss program nor a way to punish ourselves through lack of food. In fact, fasting can take many forms. Some limit or abstain from certain foods (like meat or dairy, alcohol or desserts). Others fast by preparing one or more “simple” meals each week and setting aside the difference of the cost to be contributed to a hunger offering. Fasting may have nothing to do with food but rather focus on time. Some find it meaningful to limit their TV or social media use and instead to concentrate on reading Scripture, praying, or volunteering in the community.

Whatever form fasting may take as a practice during the season of Lent, it is a tangible way to reflect on the fact we do not live by bread alone. That is one of the themes that stands behind the stories of the feeding of the multitude. In the Gospels, as in the exodus story, the people are in the wilderness—a place of scarcity where neither food nor water can be taken for granted. In their time of need, God provides them with bread—a symbol for what sustains life each and every day. But manna in the wilderness is a day-to-day thing: the people can only gather enough

food for *one day at a time* (except on the day before the Sabbath, so that they can rest from gathering). The dailiness of this is intended to remind the people that what is important here is not *what* they are eating but *who* provides it. We do not live only because of the food we eat. The deep nourishment we need comes from God, whose very Word is bread. Food that keeps body and soul together. The bread of life.



ARTIST'S REFLECTION

Feeding the multitude was clearly a fundamental and critical story for the early church. The context for the story is typically understood as a deserted place away from the cities and towns, out in nature. The event calls into question our devotion to the idea of scarcity and our unwillingness to look to the divine for the miracles of

sharing and compassion, of trustworthiness and reliance on God and our community. The story also places the disciples as key characters with the obligation to exercise agency in determining the outcome. Jesus breaking bread is the pivotal image in every version of the story. The imagery draws us to the story of the Last Supper, and in the case of Luke's Gospel, to the Emmaus reveal. We are reminded that all the Gospel writers recognized the centrality of Jesus' role in engaging the memories and imagination of the participants, ultimately inspiring an atmosphere of sharing.

We too often bifurcate the spiritual and the secular in the modern world, limiting sacred experiences to what we enjoy in our churches and temples while everyday life goes on six days a week among our friends and coworkers. However, the Bible often invites us to merge these realities.

The scene of a large group of people sharing and eating together out in nature speaks to that sacred-ordinary reality for me. In my illustration, I imagined a park setting with people sitting on the ground in smaller groups, but with

everyone very much aware of the larger community that surrounds them. The earth is the table here, and it is set for a great banquet with Jesus in the center breaking the bread. This metaphor challenges us to view our community as much larger than we are accustomed to thinking of it. If the earth is our table, what does it say about our understanding of community and diversity? How does this inform our understanding of the scarcity of resources? How does it speak to the miracle of God's love in our world? Too often we get hung up on how the miracle worked in this story of multiplying resources and we miss the real miracle of why an expanded table is made manifest and available to all.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read the six versions of this story in all the Gospels: Matthew 14:13–21; Matthew 15:32–39; Mark 6:30–44; Mark 8:1–9; Luke 9:10–17; and John 6:1–14. (If you are studying as a group, assign different people or small groups to read each.) What details are common across

versions and what details are unique? Do these differences matter to you?

2. The author suggests that the crowds who followed Jesus likely experienced food insecurity. How does that affect your understanding of the story? How does it affect your thinking to realize that there are likely people in your congregation experiencing food insecurity?
3. When have you experienced God's provision? Was it a surprising, miraculous type of situation, like manna from heaven, or something more commonplace?

4. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your communal dining experiences (both in terms of social events and Holy Communion)? Did eating alfresco take on new significance for you?
5. How do you balance abstention and abundance in your life? How can abstaining from something during Lent open your eyes to God's abundance?
6. How does this chapter's illustration speak to you in light of the themes discussed?

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