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The Dining Room Table

Matt. 14:13-21

By Janet DeWater

I invite you to think of a dining table in your past or present. Perhaps it is a large table made of elegant wood, covered with a beautiful table cloth and fine bone china. Maybe your table is a weathered picnic table, out in the back yard or at a camp ground, maybe a few simple flowers in a glass jar in the center. Maybe it is a picnic blanket filled with paper plates and Rubbermaid containers full of macaroni salad and fried chicken. Maybe it's a table at a restaurant where you celebrated a birthday, anniversary or other special occasion. Or it could be the kitchen table with faint carvings of letters and numbers visible where children sat and worked on their homework over the years. I hope these examples have painted a picture for you of happy times; of community; of sharing of special relationships.

In contrast to these tables, I have never forgotten an activity that I conducted with middle school kids who lived in the very affluent upper east side of New York City. I asked them to draw a picture of their dining room tables, and was shocked and saddened when quite a few of them drew a picture of themselves eating dinner off of a tv tray, alone in their rooms, watching tv, or sitting by themselves at a table because their parents got home much later than dinner time and ate separately.

Feeding our body is one thing, but feeding our spirits tends to happen in the company of others. I think that our gospel lesson today has a lot to say about feeding our spirits, beyond the very practical need to feed our bodies.

You may know that it can add significantly to our understanding of a Bible story when we look at the story within the context of the stories both before and after it. In our case today, the story immediately preceding the “loaves and fishes” story is one about another meal of a very different kind. The story is that of the birthday party that Herod throws for himself, where one can imagine a very lavish dining table, filled with more than enough fancy food for the powerful and elite of Herod’s social circle. The story ends with the head of John the Baptist on a platter. What was fed at this table? The body, yes, but beyond that power, and fear; very different from what is offered at the meal of loaves and fishes with Jesus. Let’s take a further look at that story.

It is in response to the news of John’s death that Jesus withdraws, for some time alone; we can imagine that it is for a chance to grieve John’s death. And then it becomes a place where compassion abounds and many are fed, but they are not like the elite, mostly male guests at Herod’s party, but rather 5000 men, besides women and children. The people; the crowds of people have followed Jesus, on foot, the long way around, to the place where he had gone by boat. Was it food

they were after? Well, yes, but not the kind that feeds the body, but that which feeds the soul. And in the process, their bodies were fed.

Sharing a meal is a powerful way in which our souls are fed. Isn't it food that is usually at the heart of hospitality? When there is a need to feed the crowds, Jesus has compassion for the people. The origin of the word used as "compassion" here has ties to the body organ of the pancreas, giving us a sense of Jesus' compassion as something that he feels "in his gut;" a very physical and real response to the hunger of the people. Jesus cares about our most basic human needs. And likewise, we are called to feed the hungry. In the breaking and sharing of bread, Jesus meets the hunger of the people for food, and by his presence, meets the hunger of the people for God.

Now, in reading this passage, the question always arises as to just how Jesus fed the people. Did the food simply materialize? Was there an outpouring of generosity and sharing among the crowds of food they had brought with them? Some other explanation? Can we ever explain a "miracle?" I'm going to suggest that we just leave those questions hanging there, because I love the wonderful mixture of the ideas of God providing for us and the community of God reaching out to one another, and of living with faithful mystery.

The people who had gone into the wilderness were seeking and they were fed. For what were they hungering? For what do you hunger? May you find that for which your soul waits as we gather around this new, and yet ages old, communion table for the very first time. Let us participate together, giving and receiving what we have in faith and love in our act of worship, because we are all invited to share in God's plenteousness and to share the resources we each have at hand. When we enact our faith collectively the power of God's Spirit is miraculous indeed.