

A Brainstorming Session

from editors and friends



Jesus seems to have spent a great deal of time having table fellowship—and the people with whom he ate often shocked one group or another. When he hung out with prostitutes, toll collectors, and other social outcasts, he scandalized the religious purists. When he had dinner with the Pharisees, he puzzled the riffraff. Many of his stories and illustrations center around banquets. Some of his miracles and resurrection appearances involve eating with his followers. They did not recognize him until he broke the bread in the traditional gestures of a host. In one of the last appearances he cooked breakfast for seven disciples on the beach.

He was known for his miracles of abundance, which also centered around meals and fellowship. The feeding of the multitudes, one of our central texts for this packet, is the only miracle that is included in all four gospels (Matthew and Mark relate two such events): Matthew 14:13-21, Matthew 15:32-39, Mark 6:30-44, Mark 8:1-9, Luke 9:12-17, John 6:1-14. The story of the breakfast on the beach also includes a miracle of abundance (John 21).

He seems to have played the role of host in many of these stories, stressing the importance of hospitality. Even the memorial for which he asked involved eating and drinking. He wanted his followers to remember him around a table with bread and wine.

There is something mystical about sitting across a table from someone. We place a great deal of meaning on the sharing of meals together. Those of us who are passionate about social justice issues find an almost cosmic meaning in the sharing of a cup of soup with a hungry person. Sure, we want to help people to clothe themselves, to find shelter, to find meaningful occupation and livelihood. We are concerned with their emotional well-being, their physical health—all of those components for a full and vibrant life.

But many of us can recall that moment in a soup kitchen line when the bells of our hearts rang out and the doors of our minds flew open—that somehow magical moment of handing a cup of steaming soup to a guest, walking with her to a table, sitting with her, even allowing her to share with us from her portion. It is the holiest of encounters, that moment when our hands touch as we steady the steaming bowl, or as we share a piece of cornbread.

This is the theme of our hunger emphasis packet, this sharing of food. “Let all who are hungry come in and eat,” says the Talmud. We are set as if for a momentous meal, and we set a place at the table for the stranger who may come to the door, the stranger who just might be Elijah. We extend the table and the circle of our family to include all of the human family—the Liberian family who have fled from their home in Monrovia to live in a refugee camp, the mother in Ethiopia whose heart sinks at the thought of another catastrophic drought, the coffee farmer

in Guatemala who is forced to sell his beans at a loss, the children of the Palestinian West Bank who long for a meal eaten in peace. They are all our brothers and sisters, and we want to open the door to them. We want to set a place at the table for them.

This packet will hopefully re-infuse us with the energy and hope that is vital if we are to continue to study and listen and help in the most appropriate ways. It tells stories of a Messiah who spoke out plainly about his concern for the most vulnerable among us. It tells us of a God who seems eager to heap abundance upon us. It includes practical things to be used to learn and teach. It includes some of the grim realities that we face each time we embrace this task of feeding the poor.

We have included some art, some dramatic readings and a couple of poignant sermons that we think will be helpful in your hunger emphasis. Perhaps simple displays would go best with these activities—a row of twelve baskets, overflowing with bread, circling around the pulpit or around and on the altar table. A basket with two fish and five loaves (probably not real fish) could stand alone in the center of the altar area. Perhaps you could begin the emphasis with the boy’s monologue, and he could place the basket on a table in a prominent place for the remainder of your emphasis.

We have used a great deal of Sharon Rollin’s art, showing a map of the world covering a plate, with loaves and fishes on the top. You could extend this theme; if Jesus could feed five thousand men and their families with this boy’s lunch, then... You could do something creative with a real map—use it as an altarcloth, placing your food baskets on it. You could take a globe apart and have food coming out of it as though it were a cornucopia. You could put a map on the wall and mark the places that are experiencing food crises—all of Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, southern Mississippi, South Dakota. You could cut out paper dolls and put a paper person on that country as a prayer reminder.

I suppose if there is one message that we would want you to hear through these resources, it is that we are facing a problem that many others have thought was insurmountable, just as the twelve wanted to send away that multitude, and that we have witnessed miracles of abundance. Therefore, our passion, which has kept us to this work “no matter what,” should be reminded of this message of hope. —lkc