



Ash Wednesday Message

2025

INTRODUCTION

Come to the Table

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 moment was not the only time Jesus dined with others at a table or told stories about tables. This Lent, we will be considering 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 the table in the kin'dom of God." (from the Presbyterian liturgy)

These words, or variations of them, 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 Table stretches around the world and across time. Regardless of the season of the church year or 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 not all Christian traditions are not yet able to share their Lord's Supper with others *officially*, the Table remains a symbol of our anticipated unity with one another and with Christ.

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.

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 barbeque on the Fourth of July or that special dessert for each family member's birthday*). Even though the church potluck supper is becoming a thing of the past in many congregations, faith communities still find ways to combine food and fellowship.

But for some people, however, eating is neither communal or 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,” or places 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.

Our Lenten series, we are being invited 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.

CHAPTER 1 - ASH WEDNESDAY

Dining Alfresco: Feeding the Multitude

“And when Jesus had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, He looked up to heaven, and blessed the loaves, and brake the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and the two fishes divided He amongst them all. And they did all eat, and were filled.

And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments, and of the fishes. And they that did eat of the loaves were about five thousand men, [let alone the women and children].”

Mark 6:41-44

Have you ever been hungry? I mean, *really* hungry? So hungry it *hurts*? Most of us reading this are among those in this world who are incredibly privileged. We’ve had the occasional growling stomach, but we’ve always known that we could and would, sooner or later, get enough to eat. We’ve probably never known real 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**, or **love**.

When the Bible tells stories about hunger or uses food and drink as metaphors for God’s presence, the backdrop is almost always about *real hunger*. The Bible itself 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 truly living from “paycheck-to-paycheck” (if they were lucky). People were starving. No wonder food and eating became metaphors for God’s providential care and promise.

Beyond the final days of Jesus, there are only about six 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 stories isn’t just told once in each gospel, it occurs *six* times, because both Mark and Matthew essentially tell the same story twice each but 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.

Drought, crop failure, and famine were the things that got the descendants of Abraham and Sarah to Egypt in the first place. 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 foreign 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 should have left us to die back in Egypt. At least we would have had food to eat!”*

Like the ancient people, modern-day refugees from natural disasters, climate change, and political corruption must cross geo-political borders in search of a way to make a living.

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” (Exodus 16:1-15). *What is it?* It’s 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 is the foundation of the stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes in the wilderness.

Every version begins the same way. A large crowd has followed Jesus out to a hillside far 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. With Jesus’ own hands and with His blessing, this meager meal feeds a multitude, and then the disciples collect the leftovers: twelve baskets of abundances.

The COVID-19 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. After six months of eating all our meals in our apartment by ourselves, my husband I* [author of this series] 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 got to share 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 U.S. 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 the Presbyterian Church asked members what they missed most about in-person worship. The most frequent response was “Communion.” Eating a piece of sliced bread and sipping a little wine (or juice) at home just isn’t the same. At Communion, we may not consume a large quantity of 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 also 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. (*Note the dual practice of subtracting negative things from your life, as well as, adding positive things at the same time.*)

I (Pastor Caleb) remember one church matriarch from my first appointment tell me every year that during Lent she proudly gave up chocolate on Ash Wednesday and waited excitedly for 46 days until she could eat her chocolate again on Easter Sunday. It struck me as odd that whatever "vices" we give up for Lent, Easter becomes the day that all these "vices" return. *Not much of a Resurrection, is it?* Our practices during Lent are meant to form *permanent* habits in us – not just easy subtractions/additions placed on top of our lives. It doesn't mean we must abstain from *all* chocolate throughout the year, but it should train ourselves to eat healthier and wiser by the time Easter morning comes around.

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 (or chocolate) alone. 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 to us. Food that keeps body and soul together. The bread of life.

What can we – who are privileged enough to voluntarily go hungry for short periods of time – do to help those who go hungry for long periods of time because they have no other choice?

Questions for Reflection:

1. If the earth itself 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 had to manifest and be available to all.
2. The author suggests that the crowds who followed Jesus likely experienced food insecurity. How does that affect your understanding of this story? Are there likely people in your congregation experiencing food insecurity?
3. When have you experienced God's provision? Was it "manna from heaven" or something more commonplace?