

## Expanding the Table: Food Justice in a Hungry World

“In Luke’s Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.”<sup>1</sup>

No wonder they called Jesus a glutton and a drunkard! Robert Karris makes that claim about Jesus and meals in his book *Eating Your Way through Luke’s Gospel*. When I first heard about that book I thought it might be one of those books filled with recipes based on Bible verses – how to cook with mustard seeds or how to make fig pudding (since Luke’s barren fig tree gets another year to bear fruit.) But there weren’t any recipes in the book, just lots of Bible verses. And lots of eating! Karris also makes a second claim about Jesus, one more stark and sobering: “In Luke’s Gospel Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate.”<sup>2</sup> This isn’t a claim about Jesus having bad manners but about keeping bad company. Not eating with his mouth open but eating with his arms open to those who had never been invited.

The gospel text chosen for this advocacy weekend (Luke 14: 12 – 24) comes almost in the middle of Luke’s gospel. Jesus has been invited to the home of a Pharisee. If the Pharisees were Jesus’ enemies he eats with them often in Luke! But Jesus is not a very polite guest. First he talks about how to choose your seat at a banquet -- near the back or by the swinging kitchen door with waiters coming and going. When the host sees you she’ll say, “What are you doing way back here? Come up to the head table!” Was Jesus complaining about where he’d been seated? Then Jesus turns directly to his host and tells him who should be on the guest list. Don’t invite your friends or your relatives or your rich neighbors for they’ll invite you back. It will keep going like that -- you invite them and they invite you until you can’t

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Order of Saint Benedict, 2006) 97

<sup>2</sup> Karris, 97

remember if it's their turn or your turn and you end up eating with the same people all the time!

“But when you give a banquet,” Jesus said, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” If Jesus' host and the other guests missed the point, he goes on to tell a parable repeating those very same words in a slightly different order: “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

Well, this will be a very different kind of banquet. Hopefully, somebody will respectfully ask the blind man, “Can I help you find a place to sit?” The woman with arthritic hands needs help cutting her meat and the man with a withered arm needs help pushing his chair close to the table. Space needs to be left at each table to fit in the wheelchairs. The poor man who has been living on the street isn't sure anybody wants to sit beside him and the poor children are so hungry they start eating before the minister says grace.

Well, it wouldn't be quite like that because it's unlikely that people would be sitting in chairs. They'd be reclining – not like DaVinci's “Last Supper” with Jesus and twelve disciples seated in chairs all on the same side of the table. Even if everyone was reclining in Jesus' parable, someone could still help the blind man find a place. As for cutting meat, well, it would be rare for anybody to be eating meat – except the wealthiest people in the land. The woman with arthritic hands and the man with the withered arm would still need some help getting down and getting back up. Hopefully someone would be willing to recline next to the homeless man who hadn't been to the public baths.

I've read this parable many times over the years -- I thought it was really lovely that all these people got invited. But I missed something. Jesus didn't say, “Invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame to dinner so I can cure them.” Jesus says simply, “Invite them.” Invite them as they are. How different this is from all those healing texts in the

gospels! A blind man's eyes are opened with spit and a prayer. A paralytic is let down through the roof and walks away carrying his bed. A man with a withered hand is cured on the Sabbath. A deaf mute begins to speak. Ten lepers look down and see their skin clear as a newborn baby. A woman bent over for 18 years stands up straight and praises God. In all these stories the person with a disability is always cured.

But everybody wasn't cured – not in Jesus' day and not now. Invite them to come as they are. Make room at the banquet. Nancy Mairs is a gifted writer who has lived with MS longer than she ever expected. In her book *Waist-High in the World* she writes about what it's like to see the world from her vantage point in a wheelchair. She invites us to think about maps, the kind of maps we use to find our way in unfamiliar terrain -- or in her case, an unfamiliar, unpredictable future. "I mean to make a map," she writes. "My infinitely harder task is to conceptualize not merely a habitable body but a habitable world: a world that wants me in it."<sup>3</sup>

In Nancy Mairs' language we're called to imagine a world that wants her and every person with disabilities in it – a habitable place for poor people, too. This awareness brings us closer to the theme of this weekend: FOOD JUSTICE rather than "ending hunger." Of course these two strands are intertwined. If we advocate for food justice we will also be working for that day when manna isn't hoarded by a few, a day when everyone has enough to eat. Food justice moves beyond food pantries and soup kitchens to a larger vision.

So I want to argue a bit with what Jesus says to his host. He seems to be talking more about charity than justice. He says, "When you invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you -- you will be repaid in the resurrection of the righteous." Do the people Jesus tells his host to invite have nothing to

---

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)  
63

offer? Is it justice to think of those who have disabilities being unable to give anything to us? Is it justice to think of people who are poor only as receivers? Or will we be changed if we sit together at the banquet? if we listen to one another? if we admit that we don't have all the answers? We've gathered this weekend to set the table for everyone – here in this banquet hall and in the halls of Congress.

Right after Jesus tells his host whom to invite, one of the guests blurts out, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Jesus responds to that guest by telling him a parable. Because this guest speaks in the future tense – “will eat bread” -- some scholars interpret Jesus' parable to be about the messianic banquet at the end of time, a feast described by the prophet Isaiah: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” (Isaiah 25: 6) That text is often read on All Saints Sunday. This feast isn't about the present but the future, not now but then. Other interpreters hear Jesus' parable as an invitation to be part of the kingdom of God. In this interpretation, Jesus is the servant. He goes first to his own people of Israel who make excuses, then to the outcasts among the people of Israel (the poor and disabled), and last of all to the Gentiles – out into the lanes and roads beyond the village. In a final word of judgment the master of the household says, “None of those invited shall taste my dinner!” They will never be part of the kingdom of God. Such an interpretation is surely dangerous for Jesus' own people, the Jews. But this interpretation also spiritualizes the dinner! Jesus isn't talking about food and eating, but about personal salvation. Will we accept Jesus' invitation to be part of God's commonwealth or be left behind? Jesus isn't really talking about eating at all.

Or is he? Remember: before Jesus told the parable, he had already told his host to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame to dinner. That wasn't a metaphor or a parable! So why would we turn his parable into a banquet in the sky by and by? Or why

would Jesus be talking only about personal salvation? We're always tempted to analyze Jesus' parables when he invites us to live in them. So we need to dig deeper: what if Jesus is talking about eating? Why did people make excuses about coming to this dinner? Why didn't people share Jesus' vision of table justice? Maybe we need to pay closer attention to what Jesus was saying. In his parable we hear three excuses. Maybe you remember the song from the Medical Mission Sisters – if you do, sing along with me:

I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now,  
I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow,  
I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum,  
Pray hold me excused – I cannot come.

That's not a bad rendition of the three excuses! The first one invited said, "I've bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets." Now, who would buy a piece of land without ever seeing it? Even if you've never seen it, do you have to see it right now? Won't the land still be there tomorrow? This person is clearly dissing the host who would surely hear this excuse as bogus – nobody buys a piece of property without seeing it first! There's another question: who in Jesus' world could buy land? Perhaps someone like the farmer who lived down the road from my family when I was growing up. He was buying a farm for each of his grandchildren! Years ago at the Center for Theology and Land I heard an agronomist from the University of Iowa say that if agricultural policies didn't change there would someday be nothing left in Iowa but huge mega-farms, tended by migrant workers. Small family farms would be gone and small towns along with them. In Jesus' parable, this landowner thought property was more important than people.

Another person invited sent this RSVP: "I've bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to try them out; please accept my regrets." The host would see right through this absurd excuse. Have you ever watched the oxen pull at a county fair? You don't want one ox to go left, the other right! Nobody would buy one team of oxen without knowing if they could pull

together! And you surely wouldn't buy five teams! This person might as well say, "I'd rather eat with an ox than come to your banquet!" Now Jesus could have made his point with one yoke of oxen. But five? Five yoke of oxen – that would be ten oxen. Literally tons of oxen! You wouldn't need five pairs of oxen unless you had a really big plot of land.<sup>4</sup> Today that would be like buying a Model 1790 24-row John Deere corn planter, a planter you'd need for a really big farm. When I was growing up we had a puny 4-row corn planter. Of course my dad farmed only 280 acres and didn't own even one of them.

Vandana Shiva, environmental activist from India, has spent years raising her voice about the downside of globalization. She has seen the damage caused by big farms, big money and those who can afford five yoke of oxen. In 1998 the World Trade Organization's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill and Monsanto. Farm-saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds that need fertilizers and pesticides and cannot be saved. Now, in every planting season, poor farmers have to buy seeds that they used to save from one year to the next. Not only do they have to buy seeds but prices of farm produce have fallen dramatically because of WTO's free trade policies. The fall in farm income is due not to a change in productivity, but to an increase in subsidies in countries such as the United States and an increase in monopolies controlled by a handful of agribusiness corporations. Indebtedness has increased many fold and despair along with it.<sup>5</sup> Since 1997 200,000 farmers in India have committed suicide – and she reported those

---

<sup>4</sup> Insights on the absurdity of the excuses sparked by Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grant Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980) 95-98

<sup>5</sup> Vandana Shiva, "Destroying Small Farmers," in George S. Johnson, ed., *Courage to Think Differently* (Cambridge, Minnesota: Adventure Publications, 2013) 179-180

numbers in 2009.<sup>6</sup> Shiva says, “Feeding humanity should not depend on the extinction of farmers and the extinction of species.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus’ banquet has gotten far more complicated! Ah -- you probably remember that there was one more excuse for not coming to the banquet: “I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.” Well, that seems like a reasonable excuse though that person didn’t even express regrets. Many of my excuses are also reasonable. My family needs me. I have a fulltime job. I don’t have time to advocate for a more just banquet. I don’t know enough about global food policies. The needs are too great. After the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame have been invited – the master sends his slave out again: “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in so that my house may be filled.” How many will that be? This guest list is overwhelming. We’ll need a lot more help! It’s always tempting to wait for God to set the table for the messianic banquet at the end of this age.

Of course this is a room full of people who aren’t waiting! You haven’t come here for Ecumenical Waiting Days or Ecumenical Charity Days but for Ecumenical **ADVOCACY** Days. You’re thankful for the vision of God’s feast at the end of time but you believe such visions are meant to shape our meals within this span of time. You also remember that Jesus taught us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Not only is this prayer in present tense but the pronouns are plural – “Give us this day our daily bread.” I know that “us” includes more than me!

A couple years ago David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, spoke at Advent Lutheran Church in New York City where I’m part of the clergy team. He talked to

---

<sup>6</sup> Vandana Shiva, “From Seeds of Suicide to Seeds of Hope: Why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and How Can We Stop This Tragedy?” (The Blog: Huffington Post: April 28, 2009) 1

<sup>7</sup> Vandana Shiva, “Destroying Small Famers,” in George S. Johnson, ed., *Courage to Think Differently*, 181 (Shiva’s chapter is from her book *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, South End Press, 2005)

pastors and lay people downstairs in the same room where folks come for groceries and for community lunch – and he invited us to see beyond the basement! Some of the things he told us are in his wonderful book *Exodus from Hunger*. “When I speak in churches,” he says, “I ask folks how they help hungry people. Almost everybody contributes to food charities and food charities now donate about \$5 billion every year in this country. This is wonderful.”

Then, he went on:

But when I ask people in churches whether they have ever contacted an elected official about national nutrition programs such as food stamps and school lunches, only a few people raise their hands. Yet all the food provided by all the charities in this country amounts to about **6 percent** of food that poor people receive from federal food programs such as school lunches and food stamps.<sup>8</sup>

David Beckmann wasn't saying, “Stop feeding hungry people at Advent.” He was saying:

Expand your pronouns and your invitation – and call on your elected officials to expand their vision and their policies. I know you already know this or you wouldn't be here this weekend. We know that Congress can wipe out seats at the banquet and we know it's happening now – not in the future. One more word from David Beckman:

In August 2010 Congress cut \$12 billion from future food stamp benefits. That one, quick decision by Congress took away from needy people more food than all the charities in this country can mobilize in two years.<sup>9</sup>

You've come to Washington this weekend to talk to your representatives and senators about food justice. You have already experienced that raising your voices matters. Lobbying by Bread for the World and other groups gained support for Earned Income Tax Credits that lifted 7 million people – half of them children -- out of poverty.<sup>10</sup> Remember the tragic suicides among India's farmers? Vandana Shiva and others said, “Enough!” They started a

---

<sup>8</sup> David Beckman, *Exodus from Hunger: We Are Called to Change the Politics of Hunger* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 10-11

<sup>9</sup> Beckman, 11

<sup>10</sup> Beckman, 134



Seeds of Hope campaign to stop farmers' suicides. The transition from seeds of suicide to seeds of hope includes:

- a shift from genetically modified, non-renewable seeds to organic, open pollinated seed varieties which farmers can save and share.
- a shift from chemical farming to organic farming.
- a shift from unfair trade based on false prices to fair trade based on real and just prices.

The farmers who have made this shift are earning 10 times more than the farmers growing Monsanto's Bt-cotton.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' parable may be about the messianic banquet and it may be about the urgency of accepting his invitation to discipleship, but it is also about eating, about expanding the banquet table now. Jesus keeps eating his way through Luke's gospel to the very end. The night before he was killed, Jesus gathered to share the Passover meal with his disciples. Surely that meal included not only twelve men, but also Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. They must have been there because Luke remembers them by name at the empty tomb, along with other women who are followed Jesus from Galilee. At that last supper, Jesus shared bread and cup with those around the table and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." When Jesus said, "Do this," did he mean only this bread and this cup? Not if we pay attention to the witness of Luke's gospel! Remembering that witness, we hear Jesus gathering up all the meals he shared with others.

Do this: eat with people who are poor and crippled and lame and blind

Do this: share meals with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners

Do this – dare to be as disruptive as the woman who crashed Simon's dinner party and wept all over Jesus feet

---

<sup>11</sup> Vandana Shiva, "From Seeds of Suicide to Seeds of Hope," p. 2

Do this -- praying "Give us this day our daily bread.

Do all of this in remembrance of me. Do this now and the future will be different.

With the hope of Jesus in our hearts, join me in a closing poem, Lucille Clifton's  
"spring song" – slightly adapted for our gathering. Simply echo the words I say...

the green of Jesus  
is breaking the ground  
and the sweet  
voice of the risen Jesus  
is opening the house and  
the dance of Jesus music  
has hold of the air and  
the world is turning  
in the body of Jesus and  
the future is possible.<sup>12</sup>

Keynote Address: Ecumenical Advocacy Days: April 5, 2013

Texts: Exodus 16: 16-18 and Luke 14: 12-24

Barbara K. Lundblad

---

<sup>12</sup> Lucille Clifton, "spring song" in *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969 – 1980* (Brockport, New York: BOA Editions, Ltd.) In the original poem lines 3 and 4 read: "and the sweet smell of delicious Jesus"