
Share, Eat, and Be Filled

Matthew 14:13-21

As a minister of the gospel, I take quite seriously the task of positioning myself between two important theological and pastoral tensions: What I'll call, the dream and the work. You can't have one without the other, the saying goes. The late Walter Brueggemann, biblical scholar, theologian, and UCC minister, wrote in his book *Prophetic Imagination*: "[T]he task of . . . ministry is to nurture, nourish, *AND* evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." The work and the dreaming.

As Christians we are to be actively imagining the world as God would have it, the "on earth as it is in heaven" kind of dreaming—that Jesus prayed for and asked that we do the same. These visions of God's kin-dom keep us from getting stuck in present complacency and hopelessness. I hear this dreaming behind the hymn-writer's question, in our hymnal, who asks:

What is the world like when God's will is done?
No more is neighbor just ally or friend;
peace thrives in places where once there was none.
This is how God works when rivalries end.

Dreaming is a spiritual exercise. And never a passive one. We dream of a world as it *should* be against the present that suggests otherwise—a world where everyone has enough, everyone is enough, just exactly as they are. The words, *Radical Belonging*, come to mind for me. God wants to move us from being just another space where people "fit in", to being a house where people can belong. Radical belonging means there are some societal and systemic injustices that we have to work to undo in order to make belonging a reality for everyone.

And if we are to become a setting of hospitality within these walls, there may be some things we have to confront so that we can create an environment of welcome, not just for those who might show up, but for each other. It is sometimes much sexier to fight for justice outside of our collective, to show up to a protest, to do the work of activism, than to do the intentional work of creating the space we need for ourselves here. I like what one writer says about belonging. "Belonging means the ability not to just join a community or institution, but to have the right to co-create the space that one joins."

In a sense, what takes place in this room each week is a microcosm of the world we are dreaming. It is the practice AND the game. Modeling God's kin-dom. Practicing radical belonging until we get it right. By the way, I think we are getting many things right about this here, but there are some ways we can work on this.

There is another tension, equally as important. There is the dream and there is the work. The work of justice, equality, and mutual-thriving, is just that, a work. It may be inspired by dreaming but it cannot be accomplished only in how we think about the way of things. It requires positioning ourselves at the level of real human needs.

In the gospel according to Johnny Cash, 1977:

If you're holding heaven, then spread it around
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good

Someone else once said the best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up. The dream and the work. If we can get the balance of these two tensions, I believe we begin to know it means to be Christ's disciples in this world.

Today is communion Sunday. I think there is perhaps no better symbol of these two tensions pulling on us than when we gather at Christ's table. It is a table we come to again and again to dream God's vision for the world. Without that vision, we run the risk of making the table just another ritual instead of a reminder of God's grand design for intimacy, friendship, and belonging. Jesus said in the upper room, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." Not out of some religious obligation that needed to get checked-

off. He wanted to do it out of a deep love for his friends. It is at the table, the church learns to love again. But the table isn't just for dreamers. Even as we participate in the symbolic action here, there is real bread, and real juice. The table reminds us that in community, there are real needs that *need* real responses. There is real hunger, even among those left malnourished by the empty promises of Empire.

Jesus, in Matthew 10 says: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." There is something sacramental about meeting the tangible needs of the most vulnerable among us. God is made manifest in the very act. If you think about it, it's the symbol of the table—the way it is portrayed in the Scriptures—that sets it above any and all other symbols of the faith, including the cross. It's not the symbol of the church building or the baptismal waters. It is only after Easter, and Jesus's death, that the cross becomes the central symbol of the church. During Jesus's earthy ministry, he could have given us any symbol, and yet he left us with a meal. Think about how powerful that is. Something so utterly ordinary to convey something so powerful and sacred.

Jesus seems to think that the regular act of eating with God and with others at the table can restore what is broken and heal the world. How did we miss how simple this should be?

There is an intimacy in sharing together around the table. When you put away your phones, turn off the tv, and just commune with those seated around you. One of our family's favorite restaurants is the Melting Pot in White Plains, NY. It's a fondue restaurant where each section of the meal takes time to prepare and you cook your food in the middle entree section of the meal. I'm sure you are aware of this. It's not just that the food is good or that by some miracle everyone can find something they'll actually eat. It's a very slow pace. It's a meal that becomes less about the consumption of food, and more about having the time to enjoy the presence of those you are sharing the meal with. I think the values of this, mirror the values of Christ's table.

The thing about meals at a table is that you are positioned to face one another. It becomes a sacred conversation circle. And how we need to deviate our attention from our devices to each other. How starved are we for belonging and connection?!

When you come to this table in just a few moments, there may be some individual blessing you will sense in taking these elements. Many of you use this time as a personal time of prayer and reflection. But I ask that you take notice of how others are partaking in this same meal. Connect with those who serve you the elements. Think about when Christ asks us to eat and remember, he wasn't just talking about this passion and the cross. He wanted the table to be a place we come back to often to inspire the imagination for how the world should be.

Today, I had lots of thoughts to share about Jesus feeding the women, children, and 5,000 men. But I felt impressed to spend time instead re-claiming the importance of the table. This miracle story in Matthew 14 is one of my favorite stories in the Gospels, but maybe not for reasons that are most clear to us. I'm less interested in whether or not Jesus actually took a kids measly lunch and multiplied it to feed a group the size of a small town. I'm more interested in the other miracle that took place. The crowd received bread. The disciples received a new imagination. They were bent on sending the crowds away when it became late in the midst of that wilderness setting. Jesus stops them and multiplied the loaves, but perhaps the greater miracle was multiplying disciples who no longer believed scarcity has the final word.

Jesus asks that they bring the 12 baskets filled with bread scraps to the people. See, you can believe something to be true but the miracle is complete by also doing the work. Those 12 baskets represent the 12 tribes of Israel. In a sense, the text is saying that the church should not rely on grand miraculous displays of God's power to feed their people. We must commit to serving the people ourselves.

Is this then the largest communion ever attempted? Taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and each disciple serving it to their group—a gigantic table of belonging.

One of the greatest lines in Scripture is in this passage: "all ate and were filled." What is the world like when God's will is done? All eat and are filled. What vision and what work it takes to accomplish this?

If Jesus believed the table was to be the central image of the church, then the church needs to reclaim its commitment to the small, ordinary, and mundane

acts of being a table community of belonging. What mindsets will need to be undone here to ensure that all can be fed and be filled? What new language might we need to adopt? What old images or ways of doing things might need to be removed? Are there community expectations that stand in need of revision, new opportunities for ministry to pursue with the simultaneous retiring of ministries that may not longer serve the dreams we are dreaming together?

I am grateful, though I carry the title of being your Interim Minister, to not only serve you during this season, and be served by you, as we gather around Christ's table, but to dream together how to make God's kin-dom a reality in this church, this community, and so the world.

God's miracle awaits! Amen.