



# Creation Season

**Proper 25, Year A, October 26, 2008**

*Special Recognition of the Place of Food in our Lives  
Food as a Sacrament/Holy Element*

Information and Reflections for Homilists, Liturgists, and Clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota

## Part I

(Reflections on the One Great Commandment in Two Parts:) Our life makes sense when its two interlocked parts (body and spirit) permeate one another - then, and only then. To love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves – these do not exist in two separately sealed plastic bags. They constantly interact in real life. Love of God empowers love of neighbor. The latter discloses the depth and scope (or lack thereof) of our love of God.

### Revised Common Lectionary Readings:

Deuteronomy. 34: 1-12      Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17      Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22: 34-46

Jesus' genius was to see that at stake in "religious" discourse is much more than "the greatest law" (Mt. 22:34-40). At stake is life itself – the blessed "greatest good" (summum bonum) for people and planet alike. ("He is God not of the dead, but of the living," as Jesus had just said. Mt. 22:32) Further, what holds life together in body and spirit is love – love for God, love for neighbor.

Food is a relational reality. It takes a community to raise a crop, distribute it, process it, preserve it, and consume it in the service of life itself. As such, food is a fateful meeting place of our love for God and our love for neighbor. Otherwise, food is a fateful disclosure of community broken, fragmented, decimated - toward God, neighbor, and self.

Who, what, how far away or near is the neighbor? If a familiar house on a certain street and a specific face and voice bespeak a single neighbor, the cosmic totality reaching out into space bespeaks the far extent of the "neighborhood" into which God placed us at our births.

If it takes a universe to raise a genuine humanity, a true "Mensch," and if it takes a humanity shaped by love of God to use food in the service of the neighbor's life rather than in self-aggrandizement (as in storing one's food-wealth in ever larger commodity-barns) – if all that is true, then we see clearly the incredibly beautiful life-giving peacefulness of God's great holiness ("qadosh") moving outward from worship into world.

Notice: "In contrast to the traditional view that uncleanness was contagious, Jesus regarded holiness/wholeness as contagious. ... Holiness, he saw, was not something to be protected; rather, it was God's numinous transforming power. God's holiness cannot be sullied; it can only prevail." [Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992), p. 117.] Jesus thus moves quite beyond Levitical purity regulations.

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Food, so intimately bound to earth, is no less bound to the holy love of God, by which it was created. As such, food builds community - here and wherever people's love for God cannot be contained until it reaches their neighbors and neighborhoods to the ends of the earth.

## Part II

OK, but it's not like that yet in most places? To wit: [Here we contrast the holy community of food that God projected for us against, on the other hand, the systemic and other factors that obstruct our appropriating food in service of holy community.]

From Kevin Sullivan at the Washington Post Foreign Service ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), 7-20-08), about "Africa's Last and Least":

"After she woke in the dark to sweep city streets, after she walked an hour to buy less than \$2 worth of food, after she cooked for two hours in the searing heat, Fanta Lingani served her family's only meal of the day.

First she set out a bowl of corn mush, seasoned with tree leaves, dried fish and wood ashes, for the 11 smallest children, who tore into it with bare hands.

Then she set out a bowl for her husband. Then two bowls for a dozen older children. Then finally, after everyone else had finished, a bowl for herself. She always eats last.

... Rubbing her red-rimmed eyes, chewing lightly on a twig she picked off the ground, Lingani gave the last of her food to the children. 'I'm not hungry,' she said."

As Sullivan comments, "Cultural expectations ensure women are hit hardest by growing food crisis."

From Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 122, who shows us the politics of Jesus' time:

"The issue is systemic, not individual; it is not about the virtue of individuals, but about the effects of the economic system... The issue is ... a social system that places over half of the society's wealth into the hands of a few (1 to 2 percent), with crushing consequences for the many." [Statistical evidence about, with pungent analyses of, the present American chasm between rich and poor, a chasm that also systemically obstructs holy use of food, are abundant and compelling in Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A political History of the American Rich* (NY: Broadway Books, 2002).]

Borg then refers, as antidote to "the Domination System," to some work of Walter Wink as "the most persuasive and powerful chapter-length treatment of the politics of Jesus known to me." That chapter is in: Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992, pp. 109-37, "God's Domination-Free Order: Jesus and God's Reign."

Not to share food with the hungry is a violent act. It comes from a dog-eat-dog philosophy. It is part of the

The Minnesota Episcopal Environmental Stewardship Commission (MEESC) has prepared Creation Season materials for Propers 22-25, Year A, with a focus on food. If you find the information on this reflection to be of interest, you may wish to visit the MEESC website for more information ([www.env-steward.com](http://www.env-steward.com)). Members of MEESC are available to visit your congregation to assist you and them in an environmental stewardship walk.

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“domination system” described by Walter Wink, the basic ideology of which is “might makes right” (*Ibid.*, p. 16). Band-aid antidotes such as food shelves do not cut the mustard against this ideology, which is “the original religion of the status quo.” It is also “the dominant myth in contemporary America (more influential by far than Judaism or Christianity)” (17). Lingani has no hope in that reigning international economic/social model.

Without water there is no food. The global food crisis is exacerbated by global warming that brings drought, glacier-melt, rising salt water, and sinking water tables. See Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), especially Chapter 5, “Food and Water,” pp. 107-17.

## Part III

Nevertheless, in the nevertheless of faith to all domination systems, Jesus transforms food (as did ancient Judaism – see Lev. 19:9-10) into gifts of the Spirit for the sake of our bodies, our neighbors’ bodies, and the great global neighborhood that embraces food and families, food and persons, food and nations all together. Resurrection by definition is a beginning, not an end. Resurrection uses food in the service of God and neighbor – today. In the words of Crossan’s question, “How many years was Easter Sunday?,” and his thoughtful answer: “Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens.” [John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1994), pp. 159-92, 197.]

Nevertheless, despite uses of food to accumulate wealth, to withhold community from “the unclean,” to maintain caste systems, to dominate and separate – nevertheless, the creative loving holiness of God journeys through the ages into our times. To wit:

Ronald J. Sider presents “inspiring stories about overcoming lopsided Christianity” in his *Cup of Water, Bread of Life* (Zondervan, 1994). There is the Balinese Christian Wayan Mastra, for instance, who brought to Bali “a balanced Christian ministry - a wholistic ministry where we both concentrate on building up the church itself in self-sufficiency, and also in becoming a community which will be a blessing to others” (106). They call it “stomach theology.”

Sider reports: “Mastra’s concern is to enter a person’s life ‘through three doors: the head, the heart, and the stomach. It is like the Lord’s Prayer: (1) Give us this day our daily bread – that is for the stomach; (2) forgive us our trespasses – that is for the mind or head; (3) lead us not into temptation - that is for the heart” (106-07).

This “stomach theology” works in many practical programs such as “a system of revolving credit; a Rice Bank; an experimental farm; and vocational training” (110).

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To contact MEESC, visit their website ([www.env-steward.com/info/members.htm](http://www.env-steward.com/info/members.htm)), call the Rev Tom Harries (contact information in the Diocesan Journal), or send a note to:

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The May 26, 2008 issue of *The New Yorker* publishes an amazing report by the writer Ian Frazier, “Hungry Minds: Tales from a Chelsea Soup Kitchen.” It all happens in the historic Church of the Holy Apostles, at the corner of Twenty-eighth Street and Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. There Episcopalians feed body, mind, and spirit. “There are no pews. From the baptismal font, at the back of the church, to the steps of the altar, ninety feet away, no pews or carpet or other fixtures interrupt an open expanse of stone tiles...”

On that tiled expanse during the week Frazier and others conduct writing workshops that bring in incredibly gifted “street people,” the homeless and dispossessed. Onto that same space there pours forth from more than 3 dozen volunteers in “the largest soup kitchen in New York City” an average of 1,200 meals a weekday. For more than 25 years they have served more than 6 million meals.

That’s the church 5/7ths of the time. For the other 2/7ths, folding chairs are brought out and tables removed so that worshippers may gather, many of them coming from among the diners. Moreover, it’s an ecumenical enterprise. A Jewish congregation uses the space for Shabbat worship Friday evening. “If the Jews of New York City stopped giving, we’d go out of business,” remarks chief fund-raiser Father Greenlaw. There is no proselytizing, no handing out of religious literature. Instead Greenlaw “talks about the joy of being alive in this sacred space, of sharing a meal with other people in a beautiful landmarked building, or seeing in the people who come to the soup kitchen ‘a window into what makes humanity human, into the deepest levels of being” (Ibid., p. 64).

When administrator Elizabeth Maxwell was asked about the inspiration behind all this, she said, “Well, we do this because Jesus said to feed the hungry. There’s no more to it than that. Jesus told us to take care of the poor and the hungry and those in prison. ... The bread and wine of the Eucharist that we share with one another on Sunday become the food we share with our neighbors during the week. We believe that our job as Christians is to meet Jesus in the world. We meet him, unnamed and unrecognized, in the guests who come to the soup kitchen every day.” (Ibid., p. 65)

What is the Christian Response to the Global Food Crisis?

“To neglect the deprived and powerless is to reject Christ, who encounters us in the hundreds of millions of the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and alienated people of today’s world, all of whom make a rightful claim for just and compassionate responses. Their needs can be fully met only by justice achieved through political and economic institutions. The church must be a participant in this struggle for justice.”

- Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development, approved by the 208th General Assembly (1996) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Matthew 25:31-46 maintains that what we do with “something to drink,” with food, with deeds of “welcome,” with clothing, with maintaining health of the sick, with prison visitation - what we do with these things makes the difference between life and death. “The righteous” do not stand on status, and do not live on the basis of who is who. Their king, in Jesus’ story, says to the righteous: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Contrariwise, not to help the poor is not to serve one’s Lord.

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Leviticus 19:9-10: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.” [Notice implications here for our current “immigration debate”!]

John Dominic Crossan especially emphasized the importance of table fellowship in Jesus’ ministry. The following quotations are from *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (Harper, 1994):  
Jesus wants what anthropologists call “open commensality” (from Latin “mensa,” meaning table). Jesus wanted at the table “as many as you find” even from highways and hedges (Lk. 14:21b-23; Mt. 22:9-10). “But if one actually brought in anyone off the street, one could, in such a situation, have classes, sexes, and ranks all mixed up together” (68). Precisely the point!

In contrast to the domination system within empire, that is what Jesus wants - then and now. That is “radical egalitarianism” (71), and only such a social policy is adequate to food as a relational reality. The holy love of God reaches out to all at a table that is “equally accessible to all under God” (60).

“These are the words of an unnamed peasant woman from Piana dei Greci, in the province of Palermo, Sicily, speaking to a northern Italian journalist during an 1893 peasant uprising: ‘We want everybody to work, as we work. There should no longer be either rich or poor. All should have bread for themselves and for their children. ...It will be enough to put all in common and to share with justice what is produced.’” (74)

Jesus “not only discussed the Kingdom of God; he enacted it, and said others could do so as well” (93).

Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective – A Theology* (Westminster, 1974) emphasizes in common with liberation theologies that salvation is “a social event” (61ff.). “Shalom” is a state of wholeness, health, “and total social well-being in community with others” (61). Eternal life begins here and now as a quality of existence in our relationships. “In a historical view of the world, salvation is not an escape from fated nature, but rather the power and possibility of transforming the world, restoring creation, and seeking to overcome suffering” (61).

## **Part IV, Back to the Texts**

Sometimes our texts speak more directly, effectively, profoundly when we return to them after considering their import in the present day. Just re-read them without further comment as the sermon’s conclusion.

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