“All ate and were satisfied”: Fasting, Feasting and Food Politics in the Practice of Jesus

By Ched Myers

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> Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
> and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
> Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
> Why spend money on what is not bread,
> and your labor on what does not satisfy?
> Listen to me, and eat what is good,
> and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. --Isaiah 55:1-2

> Our global food system is broken. Small farmers in the US and around the world cannot earn a fair price for what they raise. Meanwhile, nearly 800 million people around the world go hungry every day. Driven by big corporations, the agricultural system no longer values healthy, delicious food, productive and sustainable rural communities or people’s right to make decisions about their communities and their farms. This is why food sovereignty – the right for all people to decide what they eat and to ensure that food in their community is ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally appropriate – is so important.
> -- https://grassrootsonline.org/what-we-do/the-issues/food-sovereignty/

“He told them to give her something to eat” (Mark 5:43.) This curiously mundane instruction concludes Jesus’ most dramatic healing in Mark’s gospel. He has just raised a young girl from the dead, and members of her household are still reeling from astonishment. But Jesus understands that the living need to eat.

Eating is the most essential human practice, both habitual and symbolic. Food sustains and enriches our life and cultures, yet when there is too little or too much of it, desperation or greed follow. Food brings people together, but also divides them. Table fellowship (with whom, and how, and what we eat) mirrors the inclusions and exclusions of the wider society. Food is, in short, both basic and profound. This means it deserves both anthropological and theological investigation.

I. “…every kind of food that is to be eaten”: Food in the Economy of Grace

The Bible has a great deal to say about food, which is woven throughout the narratives of both creation and redemption. The six days of creation culminate with a celebration of natural food-abundance (Gen 1:29f). The act of eating stands at the center of both Garden (Gen 2:9) and Fall stories (Gen 3:1-6). After the expulsion from Eden food-production becomes the primal experience of alienation (Gen 3:17-19). (I take this to be a traditional tale that preserves the ancient memory of the painful human transition from sustainable hunting-gathering culture to farming civilization and its discontents.)

Later Noah is introduced as one who will relieve the dystopian curse of agriculture (5:29). We often forget that not only were all the critters taken aboard the Ark, but also "every kind of food that is to be eaten" (6:21). The renewed covenant after the Flood has a new ethos of eating at its core (9:3-5).

Food is part of the story of salvation as well. A meal with angels under an oak tree sets the stage for the divine promise to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1-19). The politics of famine and empire figure into the Joseph narrative, and explain how the Hebrews arrived in Egypt (Gen 41, 47). And the great liberation from slavery is ritualized in the Passover meal (Ex 12; for more on this, see www.chedmyers.org/blog/2017/04/11/%E2%80%9C-tale-two-meals%E2%80%9D-ched-myers).

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When Israel had to face the harsh realities of life outside the imperial system, however, they pined for the cuisine of bondage: "In Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate our fill!" (Ex 16:3). The ancient Hebrews—like modern Christians—had trouble imagining any economic system (and perhaps any diet) other than that which was produces by Pharaoh's military-industrial-technological complex. Thus the first lesson of wilderness Israel centers around a strange, herby food called *manna*—which means "What is this?" (Ex 16:15,31). The focus of this story is God's instructions about how to gather and distribute the divine gift of sustenance (Ex 16:4). [*Above: Ercole de' Roberti "Israelites gathering manna," 1490.*]

"Bread raining from heaven" (Ex 16:4) means to be a metaphor about earth's fruitfulness and human dependence upon the divine economy of grace. As Second Isaiah later puts it:

> The rain and snow come down from heaven
>
> and do not return to it without watering the earth,
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> making it bud and flourish, so that it yields
>
> seed for the sower and bread for the eater… (Is 55:10).

Because the land and its yield belongs to God, people should equitably gather the gift so that everyone has enough (Ex 16:17f). Moreover, like all organic matter, the *manna* it is perishable. This is old wisdom, asserting that food represents *true* wealth. But only if it circulates. To storehouse it for gain is to violate the gift, and it will rot (Ex 16:19f).

This lesson is another memory of the old subsistence, pre-agricultural lifeways. Indigenous people, Lewis Hyde writes in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property,* "understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again,

not kept… 'One man's gift,' they say, 'must not be another man's capital'." This insight lay at the heart of Yahweh's alternative to the Egyptian economy of "store cities," which extracted wealth from subject peoples, and exploited a slave class that did the work (Ex 1:11-14). Israel was to embody a new community in which "no one has too much, and no one too little" (cf. II Cor 8:13-15).

It is in *this* context that Sabbath observance—the core of Torah spirituality —is introduced (Ex 16:22-26). Sabbath represented a hedge against the tendency of agricultural societies to conclude that human ingenuity is the source of fruitfulness. Thus our control over forces of production is to be regularly interrupted by a prescribed rest (once a week and once every seven years) for both the land and human labor (Ex 31:12-17). The Sabbath cycle was supposed to culminate in a "Jubilee" every 49th year (Lev 25), so that the stratification of wealth would be periodically deconstructed.

In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or in the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family had to sell off its land in order to service a debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants became bond-slaves. The Jubilee aimed to dismantle such inequality by: releasing community members from debt (Lev 25:35-42; Dt 15:1-11); returning encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners (Lev 25:13,25-28); and freeing slaves (Lev 25:47-55; Dt 15:12-18). The rationale for this was to remind Israelites that they must never return to a system of slavery (Lev 25:42). [1]

The prophets preserve these principles of a just food economy in their relentless criticisms of the way Israel's wealth became unequally distributed, from Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Is 5:1-17) to Amos' metaphor of a fruit basket (Am 8:1-6). Their eschatological visions often center on the return of natural abundance, whether it is Second Isaiah's "food without price" (quoted at the beginning of this article), Malachi's promise of renewed fecundity in exchange for economic justice (Mal 3:9-12), or Zechariah's notion that one day "every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord" (Zech 14:21).

With this background in mind, it is curious that so many interpreters have minimized the New Testament witness concerning the relationship of food to faithfulness. Christian theologians have tended to fixate on assertions such as "Jesus declared all foods clean" (Mk 7:18f) to argue that food is simply not a discipleship concern. To be sure, a prominent strand of "food teaching" in the N.T. (e.g. Acts 10:15) argues that kosher restrictions should not function to exclude people from table fellowship. But this struggle, understood in its cultural context, only underlines how Jesus and the early church were deeply concerned about the fraught relationship between persons, society and food.

In the social world of first century Jewish Palestine, kosher regulations were central to the definition of ethnic and social boundaries among Jews. To refuse to abide by such restrictions represented, therefore, a radical strategy of boundary-crossing and social inclusion on the part of the Jesus movement. (It did *not,* on the other hand, connote a wholesale rejection of Torah or Jewish culture, as is often implied by many Christian interpreters). In other words, these texts reflect not an ambivalence about matters of diet, but rather a concern for how to restore food to its proper social and symbolic function as something that brings people together rather than

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[1] For a more detailed exploration, see C. Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Tell the Word, 2001).

separating them. This is precisely Paul's arguments about eating in Romans 14: don't allow food to become an issue of privilege or power.

Nor is this strand the only testimony concerning food to be found in the gospels and epistles. In the next two sections, I argue that the Jesus tradition articulates an *inherent right of human beings to an adequate food supply*. As such, food is a central symbol of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom as that space in which all are welcome at the table and which all have "enough." To make this case I focus on two narrative sequences in Mark's gospel.

II. "…hungry and in need": A Food Economy Should Be Made for Humans (Mk 2:13-28)

Early in Mark's gospel we encounter a series of food conflict stories between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding *who* disciples eat with (2:15f), *when* not to eat (2:18f), and *how* they should eat (2:23ff). The Pharisees represented a Jewish renewal movement that was rapidly gaining social power and influence in Mark's time. They sought to apply Purity and Debt regulations to *all* the people in their daily lives, in contrast to the educated and affluent Judean clerical aristocracy who did not expect the masses to be observant. The Pharisees focused on agricultural and household practices relevant to village life rather than on Temple-centered obligations. For Mark they were the real competitors with the Jesus movement for the hearts and minds of the disaffected.

This is reflected in these three gospel episodes, in which Jesus defends his disciples' practices regarding issues that were important to the Pharisaic program: restrictive table fellowship, public piety, and Sabbath observances. The settings of these stories symbolize what we today call the economic sphere: in a traditional agricultural society the *table* was the primary site of "consumption," and the *field* the site of "production." [2]

The call of Levi narrates a remarkable transformation (Mk 2:13-15). Levi was a local Jew probably employed by a Gentile "tax-farmer" who held contracts to collect imperial taxes (plus a profit). Native tax collectors were hated reminders of how the Judean nation was in debt-servitude to the Roman colonial system. But Jesus challenges Levi to discipleship, and in the very next scene we see "sinners" (that is, those who are in debt) sharing a meal with tax-collectors (that is, those who enforce the debt obligation) around Levi's table. This fellowship between "class enemies" is extraordinary indeed, and we can only surmise that it must have been predicated by some kind of Jubilee debt-release on Levi's part.

In Mediterranean culture the shared meal was the heart of social intercourse. The Pharisees object here (2:16) because they were deeply concerned about the dietary, ritual and legal issues surrounding table fellowship in their endeavor to keep "clean" and "unclean" separate. This brief clash anticipates a longer meal controversy later in Mark, where Jesus repudiates not only exclusionary table practices but the whole basis of Pharisaic authority (7:1ff). It is in the context of this teaching that Jesus "declares all foods clean."

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[2] For a discussion of the fishing economy around the Sea of Galilee, the role of peasant producers, and how this illuminates the story of Jesus' call of the first disciples in Mark, see C. Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol. I* (Orbis, 2009), pp. 22-30.

Jesus next excuses his disciples from a public fast day (2:18-20). Mark's community was probably impressed by the rigor of Pharisaic religious discipline. Jesus, however, cuts to the deeper issue: a society in which some can afford to fast ritually while others truly go hungry is "sick" (2:17) In contrast to the symbolism of deprivation (fasting), he likens the sovereignty of God to a wedding party in which all experience joyous abundance. In his famous wineskins saying Jesus argues that the "new" wine of the discipleship movement must not be co-opted by "old" forms of cosmetic piety (2:21f).

Culminating this sequence, the disciples cut through a field and strip grain to eat, drawing fire from Pharisees because of Sabbath rules prohibiting "work" (Mk 2:23f). There was resentment among Galilean peasants about the legal control exercised by the Pharisaic establishment over the sowing, harvesting and marketing of produce. Most poor peasants and sharecroppers simply could not afford to conform to regulations about tithing, or leaving their fields fallow during the Sabbath year, or what they should and shouldn't plant or eat. From their point of view, the Pharisees were adjudicating the economy to their own benefit. Mark's grain-field episode thus contrasts Jesus' attempts to rehabilitate an ethic of Sabbath *redistribution* with the Pharisees' proprietary ethic of Sabbath *restriction*.

Jesus appeals to a (somewhat loosely rendered) scriptural story about David (Mk 2:25; see I Sam 21:1-6). As a guerilla fighter on campaign, David commandeered the Bread of the Presence for his soldiers—a much more serious "transgression" than merely eating from a field! But Jesus has added something to the story: David and his followers were "hungry and in need." This story endorses the Jubilee notion that hungry people have a right to food *despite* laws that might restrict such access. It resonates with two Levitical principles:

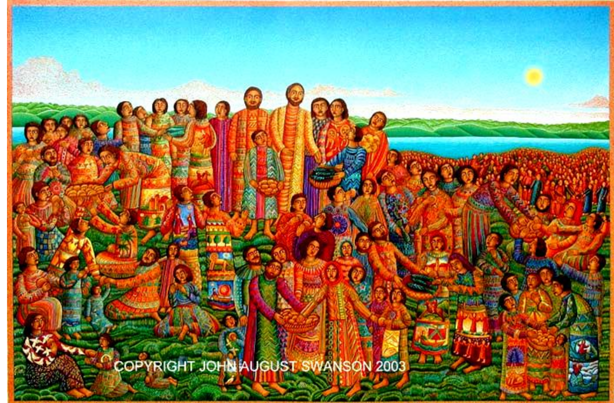
> If your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them... You shall not lend them your money at interest or provide them food at a profit. (Lev 25:35,37)
>
> When you gather the harvest in your country, you are not to gather the gleanings... Leave them to the poor and the stranger. (Lev 23:22)

This grainfield action, then, is nothing less than civil disobedience, advocating "food for people, not for profit"—or as Jesus puts it, "The Sabbath tradition should be at the service of humanity, not vice versa" (Mk 2:27; see Matt 12:7).

This series of eating controversies can be read as a strong protest over the politics of food in Jewish Palestine. At Levi's house, "haves" and "have-nots" share transgressive table fellowship. In the fasting debate Jesus argues that the poor need shared abundance, not religious abstinence. And the grainfield "direct action" dramatizes the Jubilee ethic through an object lesson. In these ways Mark tries to show that "the Human One is sovereign even over the Sabbath" (Mk 2:28).

III. "*You* give them something to eat!" Market-Dependence or Re-Communitization? (Mk 6:34-44)

We see the same issues articulated in the famous "loaves and fishes" story (Mk 6:34-44). As night begins to fall upon a large crowd that has assembled in the wilderness, the disciples urge Jesus to dispatch the people to the neighboring villages to provision themselves (6:36). Jesus' response is blunt: "*You* give them something to eat." While they agonize, indignant at having to deal with this situation of deprivation (6:37), Jesus organizes. Determining the food on hand, he distributes the loaves and fish (6:38-41). A careful reading shows that the only "miracle" here is that "all ate and were satisfied" (6:42).



It has often been noted that the formula—"Take/bless /break/give"—is found both here and in the Last Supper story (Mk 14:22). This has fueled a traditional "eucharistic" interpretation of the wilderness feeding. But narrative common sense suggests we should read the *later* episode in light of the *earlier* one, not vice-versa. In fact, at several points the feeding narrative alludes back to earlier stories of the Hebrew Bible.

For starters, "bread in the wilderness" means to remind us (yet again!) of the *manna* story, in which the people are enjoined us to keep wealth circulating instead of concentrating. In God's economy there *is* such a thing as "too much" and "too little"—in contrast to modern capitalism's infinite tolerance for wealth and poverty! Jesus' reenactment of this story, then, is *economic* in character before it is *eucharistic.*

But the gospel account is drawing on another old tradition as well: the "food miracles" of the great prophet Elisha (II Kings 4:38-44). This story takes place during a time of famine, which the Bible understands as drought compounded by economic systems of greed. We see this for example in Gen 47:13ff, where Joseph's "management" of famine conditions benefits Pharaoh's interests. As we have seen throughout the modern Third World, natural cycles of drought or flooding turn into social disasters because of political and economic conditions of exploitation.

Elisha encounters local people who, driven to desperation by "engineered scarcity," are forced to return to the ancient ways of subsistence gathering to survive (II Kg 4:39). But these peasants have lost their traditional foraging competence, long atrophied in the wake of their forced integration into the command economy of empire. Thus they have gathered gourds that are inedible (4:40). Elisha "heals" the soup pot (4:41), and then turns his attention toward "bread." The loaves brought to him are "bread from the first reaping" (4:42), inferring that they may be offerings from the harvest feast of *Shavuot* (see Lev 23:15ff). While these first-fruits would normally be offered back to God by the priests, in this crisis Elisha "redirects" them toward those in need. His instructions to "give it to the people to eat" (II Kg 4:43) are quoted by Mark's Jesus.

Jesus' disciples tried to solve the problem of hungry crowds by dispatching the people to the vagaries of "market economics" in town (Mk 6:35f). But Jesus, standing in the prophetic

tradition, reasserts the primacy of the divine economy of grace and the ethics of self-sufficiency through a practice of sharing available resources (today we might call this "cooperative consumption," or the "communitization of assets"). It is no accident that the wilderness feeding in Mark is shortly followed by two eating stories that further articulate Jesus' ethic of radically inclusive table-fellowship (Mk 7:1-30).

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"And all ate and were satisfied" (Mk 6:42). The real worlds of Elisha, Second Isaiah and Jesus (and indeed of our own global economy) were and are characterized by widespread hunger and poverty resulting from an economic system that benefited the urban elite while disenfranchising the rural poor. In such worlds, economic practices that insisted upon enough-for-everyone were, and are, miraculous indeed.

These principles echo throughout the rest of the N.T., from Luke's banqueting stories (e.g. Lk 14, 16) to Paul's insistence that the Eucharist should be a feast of equality, not privilege (I Cor 11:17-22). Indeed, the inaugural account of the church "breaking bread" in Acts occurred on the feast of Shavuot—which in N.T. times was called Pentecost—and this animated a thoroughgoing communal redistribution of wealth (Acts 2:42-47)!

Perhaps, then, our "theology of food" needs to begin with the ritual meal that lies at the center of Christian life. Eucharist invites us to "remember" not only Jesus' death, but also his life—particularly his embodiment of Sabbath economics and the feeding of hungry people as the central sign of the Kingdom. Whenever we re-enact *this* meal, we should be mindful of the ongoing struggle to secure food as the divine gift to *all* persons, and eating as a practice of gratitude and justice. [3]

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[3] For further reading see Cathy Campbell, *Stations of the Banquet: Faith Foundations for Food Justice* (Liturgical Press, 2003).