

JUST Eating in an UNJUST World

Four lessons from the Lord's Table | Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. It is *our* daily bread that we eat, not my own. We share our bread. Thus we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit but in our whole physical being. The *one* bread that is given to our fellowship links us together in a firm covenant. Now none dares go hungry as long as another has bread, and the one who breaks this fellowship of the physical life also breaks the fellowship of the Spirit.”

Eating is a matter of justice—a matter of God restoring good order and right relations between humans and God, humans and one another, and humans and the created world. Eating is a form of Christian discipleship.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus eats his way *gracefully* through ministry. He eats with tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, and sinners, and in doing so, he proclaims the story of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Eating is an avenue of abundance and inclusivity. Jesus feeds the 15,000, including the women and children who were most likely present with the 5,000 men. Jesus tells of the parable of the

wedding feast where the king invites the good and the bad, the poor and the rich—all are welcome.

Eating is a matter of evangelism. Our very salvation, in fact, is symbolized in an act of eating and drinking. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus instituted a meal. He broke bread with his disciples and made his last bid. “Do this [*eat and drink*] in remembrance of me.” God promises that as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.

The Table is a place where God works for justice. Discipleship, abundance, inclusivity, and evangelism are all central to what I call the justice of the Lord’s Supper. God cares about eating, and if Christians around the world practiced faithful eating—centered around the sacrament of Holy Communion—the possibilities for more just living could be quite profound.

We know that eating is inclusive, we know we are to feed the poor, we know that much of Jesus’s ministry happens around the hospitality of the table. But then we look at our world: from both global and local perspectives, eating is a mess. Much of Africa and Asia live

in absolute poverty. Sixteen thousand children (one every five seconds) die daily from starvation. Around 820 million people in the developing world are undernourished.

Americans throw away on average 14 percent of all that they purchase (or 48 million tons of food per year). Around 35 percent of Americans are obese and 70 percent are overweight. They undergo 400,000 liposuction surgeries yearly, 150,000 gastric bypasses, and spend \$40 billion a year on dieting related products. And as wealthy as the United States is, 33 million Americans (mostly women and children) live in food insecurity. Distorted eating is engrained in us, particularly in the United States.

These saddening statistics reveal not only the distortions in our eating practices—they also make very clear the fact that *we do not eat alone*. Our eating has effects beyond ourselves and our households and matters deeply to God’s human and nonhuman creation. The way human beings eat can be a source of the greatest of joys and the deepest of sorrows—and, simply put, we Christians need to learn to eat more justly! Fortunately, God has given us



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a meal that can shape us to be better disciples, evangelists, and ministers to the world.

So, what kinds of questions should we Christians be asking ourselves that pertain to faithful eating, or eating that responds rightly—or justly—to God? How can the Lord’s Table transform our habits? “Just” eating has to do not only with our personal health but also with the resources that go into obtaining food, the political environment in relation to food, the way food is prepared, sustainable practices, the packaging of food, our relationship to food production, and the cooking involved. Such questions lead us to examine the goods involved with food and meals—goods such as intimacy, conversation, care, hospitality, and love for God’s earth. But just eating also has to do with the aesthetics of the meal—how it tastes, how it looks, and with whom it is shared. For eating is not simply about sustenance; it is about deeply recognizing beautiful gifts from a good God.

Given these concerns, what can we learn from the Table? Consider four simple lessons that we might learn as we commune, with suggestions for how these lessons might shape our

worship practices and our daily eating habits in ways that live out the justice of the Lord’s Supper.

Lesson 1: God sustains us.

In communion, God offers us good gifts and gives us what we need to live faithfully. Most simply, we have the bread and wine. These serve to remind us that God sustains and nourishes us beyond the wheat and the grapes. The practice of communion uniquely serves as a constant reminder that all creation is a gift from God and mitigates all despair that might come as a result of the state of the world. In the end, God is Savior and we are called “only” to be faithful.

Good worship practices include thanking God, as seen for example in “The Great Thanksgiving” (see sidebar on page 8). This ancient, storied prayer—forms of which are in our hymnal and book of worship—involves thanking God for God’s work in creation and in redemption. The prayer alternates between thanksgiving and reverence, imminence and transcendence, reminding us of both the mundane and grace-filled reality that is food. Good worship habits also

include receiving the elements with open hands, celebrating communion frequently, remembering that the Table is connected to baptism and new life, and perhaps even using wine whose lingering taste reminds us of the lasting nature of God’s promises.

Good eating habits include thanking God daily for food, shaping us to continue to recognize that all food is given to us. We have neither earned it nor is it ours to hoard. Rather, it is a gift to be shared. Good eating habits include eating healthfully and temperately and respecting our bodies as given to us by God. Finally, they include generosity—offering our best to others, which might include a home-prepared meal, our best wine, or cooking to please our guests.

Lesson 2: God offers us unity.

In communion, we celebrate our unity as a body. Communion is a catholic—universal—event. We share a common table with Christians all around the world. In our words and prayers we recognize those who have come be-

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The Great Thanksgiving

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord God.

It is good that we do.

All glory is yours, eternal God, who made the universe.

We praise you for this earth, for life and breath, for beauty we have seen and wonders still to come.

From the beginning your living Word has guided and corrected us. Your prophets have called us from disobedience, and prepared us for the coming of your Son.

We praise you for the Christ who chose to come as one of us, and lived among us full of grace and truth.

For us he became poor, and knew the sadness in our days; and for us he died on the cross and was buried.

In him we know forgiveness and lifting of burdens.

He brings light to our darkness and opens our eyes to your great glory.

For you raised him from the dead and set him over all creation.

Through your Holy Spirit we are members of his body, the church, and heirs of the promise of eternal life.

Therefore with grateful hearts we join the faithful who, in all times and places, praise your name, saying:

Holy, holy, holy
God of power and majesty,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory,
O God most high!

Holy Father, we thank you that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembering me."

In the same way, he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembering me."

We remember you, Lord Jesus, as you commanded, confident we shall know you in the breaking of bread.

We remember you, O Christ, confident you will seal the new covenant in our hearts as we drink this cup.

O Holy Spirit, who brought us here to proclaim the risen Lord, unite us in one body with him who loved us and gave himself for us.

O God, who called us from death to life; we give ourselves to you; and with the church through all ages, we thank you for your saving love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* #943. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.

for us and those not with us—saints, prophets, and martyrs. The Table is a place where all are included and where forgiveness happens.

Good worship practices from this lesson include confessing our sins to God and one another, sharing Christ's peace, partaking from one loaf and a common cup, looking at one another as we serve one another, remembering those who have come before us in prayer, praying for persons when they approach the Table, and singing together.

Good eating habits include practicing unity through the hospitality of a meal. Regular fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ reminds us of our baptismal unity and our ecclesial identity. Good eating habits also include eating with those who are not like us. Eating transcends difference—gender, age, ethnicity, class, and education. In this lesson, we learn that eating is best enjoyed in unity, in the fellowship that reflects the multiple diversities of God's people.

Lesson 3: God connects us with the nonhuman creation.

In eating, we are intimately connected to the nonhuman creation. In communion, we commune with the land—we literally take the food into our bodies, as it becomes a physical part of our very selves. The bread and wine/juice have come from the land of which God has named us stewards. Wheat and grapes are the key ingredients. Yet we do not simply consume wheat and grapes when we commune—we consume that which was made by God and shaped by human hands.

Good worship practices from this lesson include using bread made by people in the church. This gift of our hands might be brought to the altar, offered up to God along with our financial gifts. Good habits include consuming all the elements, wasting nothing. Good practices also include enjoying the meal!

Good eating habits include minimizing waste, composting, preparing food from scratch, buying items with little or no packaging, recycling, stew-

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arding our bodies, eating locally, eating organically and in-season, and appreciating beautiful tastes and flavors.

Lesson 4: God blesses us for ministry.

After we commune, we are sent into the world as priests. In communion, we consecrate the elements to be Christ's body and blood for us. Communion equips us to live out God's mission to the world and to love our neighbors. It empowers us to give as God gives, and to proclaim God's truth, even through the act of eating and drinking. We learn that God's food is evangelistic—God uses food to bring us deeply into the story of salvation and to proclaim it to others, for when we eat *this bread* and drink *this cup*, we proclaim the gospel.

Good worship practices from this lesson include weekly food donations to the hungry, blessing donated food as our offering to God and proclamation of God's goodness. They include using the spiritual gifts in the congregation (including those of children) and participation of the *whole* congregation in worship as an embodiment of the priesthood of believers.

Good eating habits include giving our best, blessed food to the hungry, volunteering at a food pantry or soup kitchen, teaching children how to prepare food and participate in hospitality as a ministry, and inviting neighborhoods to church picnics and other food events.

Are your congregation's communion practices forming you to live justly? Is your grocery list informed by communion? Is your hospitality shaped by the Lord's Table? Does your consumption reflect stewardship of the body and of the earth?

God has given us a grace-filled meal so that we may also eat justly from day to day, so that our tables might contribute toward God's greater justice in the world. God's Table is a beautiful instance of Christian ideals showing up in the midst of daily life and shaping our hearts and minds and bodies in the present reality of God's ongoing work of salvation. Thanks be to God. □