

NOURISHMENT FOR A NEW BEGINNING¹
John 1: 1-18
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Holiday celebrations such as Christmas and the New Year almost always have special meals with much tradition attached to them. Recipes are handed down from generation to generation, and without those special dishes the holiday meal for many would be less than perfect. Those meals are filled with memories and tastes that nourish us as much as the food itself.

We begin the year 2011 with worship centered around a meal. So I invite us to think together about the significance of this meal as spiritual nourishment.

I

The angel said to the shepherds in Luke's Christmas story: *This will be a sign for you; you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*² A sign...for what? The manger was a feeding trough for animals. *...you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes....*, the shepherds are told. At the end of the gospel story, after the crucifixion, another Joseph (Joseph of Arimathea) takes the crucified body of Jesus and *wrapped it in a linen cloth,*³ and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb. Could it be that this clear connection

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 2, 2011.

² Luke 2: 12.

³ Luke 23: 53.

between his birth and his death was meant as a symbol of the conviction that his whole life serves as nourishment for a hungry creation?

We study his life and discover that his wisdom nourishes our spirits and shows us the way to live our lives today. Often his teaching took place in the context of meals. He begins his ministry with a miracle at a wedding feast, and he closes his time with the disciples with a meal in the upper room, a meal that we call the Last Supper. And in between, his teaching is often centered around meals.

There is a ministry of feeding. Those who work in the kitchen should be honored among us. Those who support food pantries and soup kitchens, and the youth who participate in the 24-hour famine project should be honored and thanked. Meals are a ministry! They are symbolic of a deeper spiritual feeding that we all need.

Do not work for the food that perishes, said Jesus, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.⁴ We long for spiritual nourishment at the beginning of this year.

II

Now just a word about who can receive this spiritual nourishment. One of the greatest criticisms leveled against Jesus by his enemies was that he ate

⁴ John 6: 27.

with the wrong people. This was a more serious charge in that day than you might think. He broke one of the strictest taboos of his society when he chose to eat with people of all levels of society.

Jewish society in the first century had many classes, from the beggars on the street to the highest echelons of political and religious leaders. In order to worship in the temple, you had to be ritually clean. Eating with the wrong people made a person ritually unclean. Any physical deformity or even injury constituted a barrier to worship. Listen to this striking law from the Old Testament book of Leviticus: *For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs...*⁵ And the list is even longer than that!

There was an “A-list” of those who were invited to participate in worship, and that “A-list” included only those who were whole in every visible way. This is the cultural context in which Jesus was invited to the home of a religious leader for a meal. When he noticed how the most important people were given the seats of honor at the table, Jesus told his host

⁵ Leviticus 21: 16-20.

not to invite just the “A-list” to his dinner. *When you give a banquet, said Jesus, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.*⁶

This was radical! This flew into the face of the religious laws about cleanliness. To associate with *the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind* rendered a person ritually unclean and therefore unable to worship in the temple. So we can see just how radical it was for Jesus to say, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens....*⁷

It is no accident that this church, after over a year of consideration of what we truly value, chose “Inclusion” as the first of our “Value Statements.” Genuine inclusion is not always comfortable for everyone. Neither is it always popular. But the doors of this church are welcoming and inclusive for all God’s people, and that means all *that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.*

III

Thus for two millennia Christians of all kinds have been celebrating this meal. In cathedrals and prison cells, among gatherings of millions and with individuals in private homes, in times of celebration and with those who are dying, at informal gatherings of youth around campfires and at coronations of kings and queens, in storefront churches and in mega-churches, in liberal and

⁶ Luke 14: 1-14.

⁷ Matthew 11: 28.

conservative churches, in house churches and underground churches, this meal has invited *all who labor and are heavy-laden* to share in the nourishment provided by Christ himself. In the coming year, our lives may be filled with joy, celebration, optimism, and hope; and we may experience difficult times that try our souls.

In 1943 Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer that has become possibly the most prayed words other than the Lord's Prayer. *God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to know the difference.* The perfectly formed, unblemished, beautiful people of the world can pray that prayer. So can the rest of us who have more blemishes that we can count, sins than we can number, and burdens that weigh us down.

When Jesus said *...all who labor and are heavy-laden...*, he meant a radical welcome for all, and spiritual nourishment for a new beginning.