

## **Washing up for dinner**

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Matthew 15

These last six weeks of summer we are having a series in worship called “Faith at the Table.” Thanks to Denise Brown and other artists in the congregation, we are surrounded by art with a food theme. We are looking at scriptures that challenge us in terms of how and with whom we eat. Next week we will hear from folks whose work is all about food.

This month, our Muslim sisters and brothers are also focused on food and faith. Observant Muslims do not eat or drink anything — not even water — between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan, this year from Aug. 1 to Aug. 30.

It is one thing to observe Ramadan in Pakistan or Iraq, quite another to be faithful in the United States. More than 20 years ago I worked in a restaurant with some Muslim men from Morocco. I observed them during Ramadan one sweltering summer. What commitment: maintaining a regular work schedule, with an empty stomach and dry throat, day after day for 30 days. It was hot enough in the restaurant; I can’t even imagine how people who work outside manage this month each year.

I didn’t understand the impact of the fast until I fasted myself several years ago, just for one day, in preparation for an interfaith iftar that Larry Smucker invited me to. (An iftar is the meal that breaks the fast at the end of the day.) In those 13 hours, I began to get a glimpse of how profound the fast can be, knowing that others around the world are fasting with you, yearning for water, remembering that there are those around the world who go hungry every day.

Imam Johari, of the Islamic Center in Falls Church, says this about fasting: It is not just about food and drink, Muslims must also refrain from ...“feeding their passions... The eyes must fast from the occasional inappropriate look, the heart from feelings of ill will, racism, sexism and class. It is a time of soul-training and of great charity.”<sup>1</sup> Fasting is not simply a physical experience. The point is that the physical ritual fast leads to spiritual, maybe even psychological, renewal.

In the gospel reading today, the religious leaders confront Jesus with the way that his disciples are ignoring the ritual washing of hands before meals. The Pharisees are concerned about what the disciples' actions (or lack thereof) say to those around them. The religious leaders find meaning in the traditional rituals — in this case washing hands before the meal.

Like Islam, Judaism has strict traditions around food. Think of keeping kosher — not only are foods prepared a particular way, but there are separate cooking and eating utensils for dairy and meat. Or the elaborate cleansing of a home before Passover to get rid of all leavening agents. While these rituals look like a lot more housework to me, observant Jews find meaning in these sacred symbolic acts of cleansing.

The religious leaders know that it is not only the ritual action that is important; it is the function the action plays in the community. Besides deepening one's spiritual connection to God, the rituals tie those who are observant to each other and to the tradition. The ritual creates community.

Jesus, by allowing his disciples to ignore the ritual action, disrespects the community and those who create community through their participation in the ritual. And

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post, August 13, 2011

then he has the nerve to call the leaders blind hypocrites. He points out their weak spots where even they do not observe the law to the letter. Jesus' refusal to play by the rules messes with the tenuous hold the religious authorities have on the community under the Roman Empire. No wonder they are offended and angry.

But Jesus says that it is not the ritual actions that make one clean. It is those actions which happen outside the ritual context that are important. As usual, the disciples don't quite get the point. Even though Jesus quotes the law, quotes Isaiah and uses several different metaphors, Peter still asks for a more explicit explanation.

So Jesus gets explicit. If it goes in the mouth, it comes out the other end and gets flushed away. But what comes out of the mouth is what really makes a difference. This is what comes from the heart: the way we treat each other; the way we think of each other. It is the way we treat each other that has the potential to pollute and defile, not eating with unclean hands.

Of course, the ironic result is that in Jesus' seeming disregard for — and redefinition of — the religious tradition, a whole new community and tradition develop. Although Jesus is a bit impatient having to explain himself to the disciples — again — it is not long until he finds himself in a situation where he gets a taste of his own medicine. Jesus and the disciples head to Tyre and Sidon, a region that is not Jewish. There a woman follows them. Surely this is not a new phenomenon for Jesus, to have people follow him, call out to him for healing. Yet this time the woman is more than irritating; she drives the disciples nuts. When they tell her to be quiet and to leave, she won't listen to them. She is so persistent that their job as body guards is called into question, and they have to turn to the boss for help.

The woman recognizes Jesus in a way that the religious leaders of his own tradition do not. Although she is not Jewish, she calls Jesus “Lord” three times. (This is the name true believers use in Matthew.) And yet Jesus is not inclined to pay attention to her. He tells her that he has come for the Jews, not for foreigners. He is the shepherd for the lost sheep, and she is not a sheep; she is a dog.

But here the woman turns the tables on Jesus. He has just told the religious leaders that it doesn’t matter if one washes before meals. Now she tells him that it is okay for a dirty dog to hang out under the table and get the crumbs that drop. Isn’t that a parable?

Jesus, unlike his disciples, does not ask for an explanation. He doesn’t say, “I am sorry, I don’t know what you are saying. Run that by me again.” He understands immediately. He tells her that because of her great faith her daughter is healed.

It is a good thing that Jesus understands so quickly because as he continues his journey by the Sea of Galilee and up the mountain, he is confronted with another occasion where food and preparation are at issue. If he was reluctant to heal the daughter of a woman who is not Jewish, now he is really in trouble as a whole crowd of Gentiles follows him, all looking for healing. For three days he heals people — people who cannot hear, or see or walk, people who have been severely wounded. And at the end of the three days, he is no longer concerned that they are not Jews. They praise the God of Israel. They have become, as the Canaanite woman, faithful followers.

When Jesus fed the 5,000, the Jewish crowd, one chapter earlier in Matthew, the disciples came to Jesus, worried about where the people would get food to eat. Jesus

turned it back on the disciples, telling them they should figure it out. When they couldn't find a way to feed all the people he helped them.

But this time it is Jesus who suggests that the people might be hungry. It's been three days and they have not eaten. He doesn't want to send them home, faint with hunger.

It is almost as if the disciples have no concern for these Gentiles. Once again they ask the question, "Where can we get food for all these people?" They do admit though to having some food — seven loaves of bread and a few fish.

And so Jesus does as he did when he fed the 5,000 (and when he shares the last supper with his disciples). He asks people to sit down, to organize themselves. And he blesses the few loaves of bread, breaks it and hands it to the disciples to distribute. With the 5,000 Jewish families there were 12 baskets left over. That is perhaps predictable — 12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples, 12 baskets — it is a Jewish crowd after all. But this time, with the 4,000 Gentile families, there are seven full baskets left over, the number of completion. The Gentiles receive their own kind of symbolic wholeness.

The chapter in Matthew begins with the complaint against Jesus that he allows his disciples to eat without ritually washing. The chapter ends with Jesus and his disciples feeding a whole crowd of Gentiles, in the desert, presumably without washing facilities. This is not only a meal that is unclean, but he is sharing it with people who are not even Jewish. And yet there is enough, it is more than enough. The seven baskets left over tell us it is complete.

I am reminded of a situation I heard about recently in a large Mennonite church. The congregation sponsored an Iraqi refugee couple. The church helped the couple

resettle in the US: they found them a place to live, they got them started in jobs, they visited, took them food, helped them become acculturated. The couple, both Muslims, then wanted to attend the church. The congregation welcomed them to worship.

Then it came time to eat the ritual meal. The congregational leaders had meetings, the elders had meetings, other pastors were consulted. What should they do? A Muslim couple wanted to come to the communion table, wanted to share the bread and cup.

(Traditionally Mennonites have been very careful about who can come to the table, so careful that we had communion only twice a year so as not to put our souls in peril more than necessary, to save ourselves from eating and drinking damnation. Our own congregational history includes the story of how we were instructed by the conference some decades ago to have a “closed communion.” That meant that the two different strands of Mennonites that worship here together, Old Mennonites and General Conference Mennonites, were not to share communion. We disregarded that instruction. Now these two groups have formed one church at the national level anyway.)

But back to the story: After being received warmly by the congregation, this Muslim couple requested to join the congregation in its ritual meal, communion. How far can hospitality stretch? How far do we take the idea of ritual cleansing? Is it really what comes from the heart, or is it what we put into our mouths? Should this congregation give the couple crumbs from the table, as the Canaanite woman suggests in the story. Or should there be a special communion service, on a mountain, in the desert, just for the Gentiles?

My friends, these are the situations we find ourselves in when we decide to follow this rule breaker, Jesus, when we decide to do ministry not only in the synagogue or church, but on the road, on hillsides, on the streets, with people who may not understand the tradition.

In June, there was a gathering in North Carolina called the Wild Goose Festival. It was sponsored by Sojourners, World Vision and a number of other groups. This four-day gathering in the fields of North Carolina was an opportunity to see where the Wild Goose, the Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit, is leading. Dan and Lisa Daughtry-Weiss attended Wild Goose, and I am sure would be glad to tell you more about their experience.

As reported in The Christian Century magazine, one of the realities named was that today, American Christians are “being profoundly altered by contact not only with Christians from other parts of the globe, but also with Hindus, Buddhists and nature spiritualists.” Diana Butler Bass cited late church historian William McLoughlin saying that this may be America’s Fourth Great Awakening.

“Paul Knitter, professor of world religions at Union Theological Seminary, went so far as to suggest that pluralism is calling Christians to greater faithfulness. He said, ‘Jesus was principally concerned with witnessing to the reign of God. Jesus was not as Christocentric as a lot of Christians are. Jesus is the way that is open to other ways. Pluralism becomes part of the Good News. It’s Good News when you can learn from others. It’s bad news if God is only on your side.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jesse James DeConto in “Camp Meeting,” Christian Century, August 9, 2011

This is a bold statement for Christians. Certainly for many Christians pluralism and syncretism are very bad and scary terms. But given the gospel readings we heard today, I wonder. As Anabaptists who take our cues from Jesus, where does this leave us?

As we bring our faith to the table, let's look around and see the other tables near us. In the remaining weeks of Ramadan, I hope we can find ways to bless our sisters and brothers as they fast and see the ways that we are blessed by the work of Muslims in the world. Perhaps we will have the courage and grace to invite others to join us for a meal. Or to wonder about the meal at another table.

May the wild goose/Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to be faithful at the table.