

Advent Study

2018



ELCA World Hunger
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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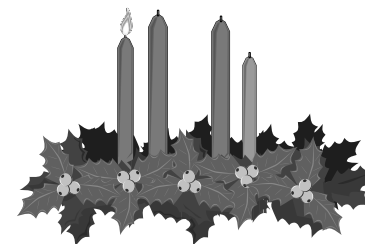
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What memorable meals in your life have brought you into relationship with other people at the table? How did dining together help you become closer to them?
- How does Holy Communion help nourish you for service of others?
- Where is God inviting you to be in the new year? How are you renewed for service of the world by the holiday season?



PRAYER

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the many ways you nourish us – with food, with family, with friends, with faith. In you, we are made new to be instruments of your grace in the world. Recall to us the many places of need in our world – places of injustice and violence, of hunger and poverty. Enrich us with love at the tables you set that we may seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with you into the future you have promised. In your holy name, amen.



SESSION 1

"Food is never 'just food' and its significance can never be just nutritional."

– Pat Caplan,

"Food, Health and Identity," 1997

Alpha Banda, Irene Banda, Kristina Stephano, Dorothy Ngamira and Martha Kamphata all have children attending the Chibothel Lutheran Nursery School, operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi. This school has 42 students and, with support from ELCA World Hunger, is the base for a feeding center for children.

Every school day, Alpha, Kristina, Dorothy, Irene and Martha show up as volunteers to cook for nearly 70 children aged 6 months to 5 years who travel to Chibothel from the surrounding 10 villages. Pooling resources, the women prepare food that has been donated, cup by cup, from the families of the children.

Whether it's daily meals of sustenance or occasional feasts of celebration, there is something special, something intrinsically communal about preparing a meal. In the 1987 film "Babette's Feast," the title character is a French refugee working as a live-

in maid and cook for two sisters. Dutifully, she prepares their austere, simple meals day-in and day-out, until one day, Babette learns she has won a lottery, making her a wealthy woman. In celebration of her newfound fortune and in thanks to her two hostesses, she prepares an elaborate meal featuring the complex and sophisticated dishes of her native French cuisine. The meal itself is almost comical, as the modest diners nervously try turtle soup, quail and caviar.

The meal is the climax of the film, but the story is as much about the preparation as the eating. Gathering the ingredients requires substantial planning and expense, including arranging for shipments of meats and cheeses from Paris. Babette has labored in the sisters' kitchen for months, but the work she puts into preparing the feast is different. It is a performance of art, a labor of love and a pouring out of herself. Each dish reflects an aspect of the life she left behind and an element of her history that she will share with the dinner guests.

To prepare a meal is to conjure elements of our own selves and our history of family recipes and cultural tastes and to share these in the creation of something new – a new table, a new experience for guests. It is to invite them into our past, to experience our memories of family dinners from years gone by, and into our present, to see part of who we are. Sharing a meal is sharing a piece of our stories as a gift to others. For the fictional character Babette, the meal is an invitation into her past and an expression of love and welcome to the other characters in the film. For the women of Chibothel Lutheran Nursery School, the pooling of ingredients from across the community and the careful preparation of the students' repast is a witness to the love for and support of the students. As Dorothy describes it, "Each and every child here is everyone's child through the bond of love."

For many of us, Babette's feast is a luxury we cannot afford. Juggling unpredictable work schedules and limited finances often means family dinners are more functional than formal. Without

In Holy Communion, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us and are invited to give ourselves in like manner to one another. The sacred meal is nourishment for a sacred vocation. In fact, for Luther, the sacrament has no meaning without this: "For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others," he writes. At the table, a community is fed and formed for service in the world. The sacrament's significance does not end at the table where we eat but extends into the world in which we live – a world we shape by our witness to the hospitality of God, who welcomes all to the table. It is a somber meal of penitent reflection and a celebratory feast of new beginnings.

This season, as we have prepared for the arrival of Christ, it may be easy to see Christmas as the end, the culmination of what has gone before, rather than as the beginning, the inauguration of what is to come. But the coming of Christmas is not merely the end of Advent. It is the start of the life of the church in the world. Freed from sin and death by Jesus Christ, it is the beginning of the servitude we choose – service of the world in gratitude for the grace we have received. It is a celebration of the freedom we have in Christ – the freedom to say "yes" to God's invitation to join with others at the table and the freedom to concern ourselves wholly with the needs of our neighbors. In Advent, the church is created to be part of the re-creation of the world begun on Christmas.

The "reason for the season" is Christ's birth, certainly. But it is also the creation of the people of Christ, who are called into the world to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

The guests sit back, satisfied. The plates are scraped clean. The utensils are carefully stowed for the next meal. Now, the work of Christmas begins.

of transition – from the servitude she was forced into by circumstance to the loving service she continues by choice.

In the second session of this study, Martin Luther extolled the virtues of Abraham, whose radical hospitality created an opening – both literal and figurative – for Abraham and Sarah to hear the promise of God in their humble tent. It was a model of hospitality Luther commended to the church, that it might be a place of refuge for all who are vulnerable, for all the strangers-maybe-angels in our midst. The people of God are called to be church for the sake of the world – and this starts with the concern for the well-being of others that gives rise to hospitality.

In the third session of this study, Paul admonished Peter for creating tables that were exclusive rather than inclusive. Peter had refused to dine with Gentiles and, in so doing, had decided who was in and who was out based on the law rather than on grace. Paul also held the Corinthians to account for their treatment of people in need, chastising them for mimicking in the church the pattern of relationships already present in the world, where those with wealth and power received the places of prestige, and those in poverty had to make do with scraps.

Each of these threads is pulled together in Luther's teachings on the most important meal in the Christian church, Holy Communion. Calling Holy Communion a "blessed sacrament of love," Luther writes:

The fruit of the sacrament is nothing other than love. As Christ gave himself for us with his body and blood in order to redeem us from all misery, so we too are to give ourselves with might and main for our neighbor. ... That is how a Christian acts.

For Luther, Holy Communion draws those at the altar closer to God and closer to one another. To partake of the sacrament authentically, one must remember both dimensions – the presence of grace in the sacrament and a willingness to bear the burdens of the other people at the table. Holy Communion is a means of grace that forms us to be signs of grace to one another.

access to the foods we want, we must use what we have – or what we are given. Meals eaten in the many households facing food insecurity may meet caloric needs, but they often leave other needs unfulfilled – the need for self-expression through cooking, the need to share and to share in our own history, and the need to pass on our traditions.

The privilege of making meaningful choices about our food is one way hunger affects more than just nutrition. Without adequate access to food, we lose a key avenue for sharing part of our history and our story. On the other hand, by supporting ministries to end hunger with an eye toward the importance of food as a symbol of our history and community, we can create opportunities for real feasting.

The women at Chibothel Lutheran Nursery School know this. Their morning routine meets the nutritional needs of the children, but as anthropologist Pat Caplan points out, "food is never 'just food.'" The meals at the nursery school are a symbol of the care, love and concern of the community for its youngest members. The promise of God for the day when we will all feast together at the banquet is more than a promise of adequate nutrition. It is a promise of a time when God will reconcile our stories, our histories and our communities together.

As we anticipate the coming of the Christ-child this season, with all the opportunities it carries for preparing food together, we look forward to this day, preparing family recipes, mixing familiar ingredients, and plating dishes for a meal whose "significance can never be just nutritional."



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What types of food or meals bring up special memories for you? How do they reflect part of your "story"?
- What other needs – besides nutrition – can meals shared with others help fulfill?
- How can ministries responding to hunger address needs beyond physical hunger?



PRAYER

Gracious God, in your loving care, you bring forth good things from the earth to sustain and nourish your people. We give you thanks for these gifts and for the community that you gather to feast together this season. Open our hearts to our neighbors facing hunger that we may with love remember both those at the table and those absent from it. Preserve us and accompany us this Advent season as we await with eager anticipation the salvation of the world. In your name, amen.



SESSION 4

"Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones."

– Martin Luther

The guests sit back, satisfied. The plates are scraped clean. The utensils are carefully stowed for the next meal. Where do we go from here?

In the first session of this study, Babette's guests had finished their sumptuous, if strange, feast, praising the talents of their hostess, if not the exact recipes she brought to life. The eponymous meal was not the end of the story, however. Thirty-year-old spoiler alert: At the end of the film, Babette informs the two sisters for whom she works that she has spent all her newfound wealth on the meal and so, rather than returning to France, will be staying on as their live-in servant. Almost as important as the climax of the meal is the denouement of Babette's decision to remain in their service. The feast is not a farewell dinner but rather a celebration



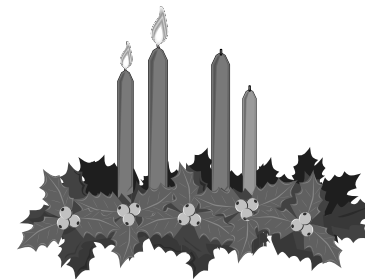
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Read Galatians 2:11-21 and I Corinthians 11:17-34. What problems did Paul see with Peter's practices in Antioch and the Corinthians' practices in their community?
- Where have we been invited to be present with neighbors in our community? How have we responded?
- Where is God calling your congregation to be in the next year?



PRAYER

Loving God, you sent your Son to invite the world to the heavenly banquet, from which no one will go away hungry. Remember us in our hunger for union with you and fellowship with one another. Inspire us to join with our neighbors at tables together, where we may work together toward a just world where all are fed. In your gracious name, we pray. Amen.



SESSION 2

[Abraham] said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on —since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

– **Genesis 18:3-5**

Advent is a season of anticipation, of waiting and of preparation. In faith, we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ, joining the sacred journey of the holy family to the manger where the Savior will be born. Unlike the innkeeper in the Gospel of Luke, we know the guest who is coming, and prayerfully, we prepare for the Christmas morning arrival.

In the midst of this spiritual preparation, many families will be making the practical preparations for the arrival of kith and kin in their homes for the holiday festivities. The season is marked by careful planning – and lots of work! – to ready our homes for guests from near and far.

The hosting of guests in the home and at the table is a recurring event in the Bible. In one of the earliest stories, Abraham is cooling himself in the shade of the oak trees in Mamre when three strangers approach. Abraham immediately goes to meet them and invites them to stay and dine with him and Sarah. The three strangers – messengers of God on their way to Sodom – accept the invitation with a promise: Sarah, despite her advanced age, will bear a son.

It isn't clear from the story in Genesis 18 whether Abraham knew from the start the identity of the guests he invited to his tent. For Martin Luther, the question isn't significant. What is significant for Luther is that Abraham's invitation is a central example of the distinctive hospitality of the people of God. Abraham's ancestors, wanderers themselves as God brought them to the promised land, "treated all guests rather respectfully and hoped for occasions on which they themselves would associate with angels." Luther saw in Abraham's example a lesson for the church in all ages: In love, we are called to attend to the needs of strangers with "generous and bounteous" hospitality. To be church, for Luther, is to be "like some refuge of the exiles and the poor," those whose well-being depends on the hospitality of others.

The uninvited guest at holiday celebrations can throw a wrench in the best-laid plans. Another place at the table must be set, another plate must be prepared. Sometimes, their presence is a welcome surprise. Often, their presence is a problem that must be addressed.

How often do we treat the unexpected stranger as a problem to address rather than as a welcome surprise? Much of the

Peter is reverting to the belief that it is the law that proves a person worthy of a spot at the table and not the grace of Jesus Christ. And you thought choosing a lunch table in high school was hard!

For Paul, the table is a sign of the reign of God. The community gathered to eat and drink represents the community that will be gathered together by God in the full reconciliation of God's coming kingdom. The church, witnessing to the "already-but-not-yet" reign of God, reflects not what is or what has been but what is to come – a banquet to which all will be welcomed and at which all will be filled. Peter's transgression, like the error of the Corinthians, was to fail to see how the gospel they preached was to shape the life of the church here and now. For Paul, there was no clearer evidence of where the church stood on the gospel than where its members stood on meals.

Paul's letters – and much of Scripture – invite us to think about the people who join us at our tables. But it would be too narrow a question to ask, who will dine with us this holiday season? For Paul, the dining table was a central symbol of who the church is, but there are so many "tables" at which we choose to sit – or choose not to sit. Our communities are filled with tables – places where we are invited to gather with neighbors, to stand with one another, to advocate for each other and to meet our common challenges together. Will we be like Paul, who envisioned tables as places of grace where all have a place and all are filled? Will we be like Peter, who abandoned the gospel by refusing to dine with the unclean Gentiles? Will we be like the Corinthians, whose corrupted table perpetuated hunger?

The tables the church participates in reflect our beliefs about who the church is called to be and the transformation of the world God is enacting in our midst. As we look back on the year past and look ahead to the year to come, we are invited to reflect on the tables at which we sat – and the invitations awaiting us. Where is God inviting the church to be? Who is God inviting the church to be?

glance who among the hundred or more diners is a member of which group. All dine together; every seat is an equal station in the room.

The situation in Paul's Corinth was very different. The meal Paul writes about in his first letter to the Corinthians is a corruption of this kind of community supper. The early meal he refers to is a first-century version of Holy Communion, at which the church would share not just bread and wine but an entire meal. Historian Helen Rhee writes that this meal was a primary way the church served the community. The sacrament, while ensuring that each church member received the means of grace through the consecrated elements, also ensured that the community received the more mundane nourishment of food, particularly for those who were facing the first-century version of food insecurity.

But that wasn't the way it was working in Corinth. The early church included both members of wealth and members in poverty, according to Rhee, and in Corinth, it appears that the former received their fill while the latter yet again were left wanting: "One is hungry and another is drunk," Paul admonishes.

This isn't the first time Paul has written about eating and drinking in the church. In his letter to the Galatians, by some estimates written in the year before the letter to the Corinthians, Paul recollects his brazen challenge to Peter, the apostle at Antioch: "I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Galatians 2:11). Peter, who used to dine with both Jews and Gentiles, has begun to limit his gustatory activities to more exclusive parties, dining only with Jews. The reason for this, according to Paul, seems to be the presence of a group of Jews ("the circumcision party") who felt that such intermingling was unbecoming of a Jew like Peter.

Paul disagrees – forcefully. Confronting Peter, Paul charges that his exclusive dining choices are a transgression against the gospel, which teaches that it is Christ alone who justifies and not circumcision. By refusing to eat with uncircumcised Gentiles,

rhetoric about neighbors in need makes it easy to miss the humanity of the stranger in our midst. A neighbor living in poverty becomes a statistic, a member of "the poor" whose poverty must be managed. A family seeking refuge in a new country becomes yet one more set of "migrants," the growing numbers of which must be "dealt with."

Around some tables this holiday season, guests will find their names written on handcrafted cards indicating their place at the table. This seemingly simple act is a powerful symbol of welcome. Here, at this table, you have an identity. You have a place. Crafting and displaying nametags is a simple yet profound act of hospitality. Hospitality, at its root, is a witness to the identity and inclusion of each person at the table. Wanderers at Mamre become "lords" at Abraham's table. "Exiles" in Luther's Germany become guests worth serving and protecting in the refuge of the church.

Luther links Abraham's hospitality with the well-known line from Hebrews: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). By showing radical, abundant hospitality to the three strangers, Abraham opened himself and Sarah up to the strangers' revelation of their full identity as messengers of God – and to the promise of God they bring. We may not encounter angels in our community this season, but by remaining open to the strangers God sends into our midst, by keeping our spiritual "inns" open to the guests who come to our door, we can prepare for God to be revealed in the unexpected neighbors we encounter.

Hospitality means more than being polite. It means remaining open to what God is revealing to us through our neighbors – and it is a witness to the world that every neighbor is welcome at our table.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does Abraham's story shape our understanding of hospitality?
- In what ways do our church and our larger community show hospitality toward strangers? Do our neighbors experience our church as a refuge welcoming them in or as a fortress keeping them out?
- How can the practice of hospitality be a witness to the value and dignity of all our neighbors?



PRAYER

Loving God, you welcomed your people into relationship with you while we were still sinners, strangers to your promise. Guide us to show hospitality to the neighbors in our midst, that our church may reflect the grace and love you first showed us. Let our open table give rise to open hearts that witness to the dignity and worth of all of your creation. In your gracious name, we pray. Amen.



SESSION 3

"When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with their own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk."

– I Corinthians 11:20-21, RSV

Advent is a season of anticipation, but this anticipation is not passive waiting. Perhaps a better way to describe it is as a season of preparation – we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ-child on Christmas. But more than this, Advent is a time for the church to prepare itself for the reign of God that “broke in” to human history on the first Christmas. It is a time to reflect on the year behind and consider the year ahead – and to evaluate both in light of the question: How well do the ministries of our church anticipate the coming fullness of God's reign?

At a community meal at Unity Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, guests gather around long tables, sharing in the hot meal volunteers serve from overflowing warming trays. The room is full to bursting with families, couples and individuals. Among them are both neighbors dealing with hunger and homelessness and volunteers and visitors sharing in the evening experience. With the exception of the servers, it is impossible to tell at first