

A TALE OF TWO TABLES

Have you ever tried to do the math? 5 loaves, more than 5,000 people; one loaf for each 1,000. Have you ever tried to tear a loaf of bread into a thousand pieces? You either begin with a larger loaf or you need a magnifying glass to see your tiny crumb! Intriguing isn't it!

And even more intriguing, we are told, "And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full." (vs. 20) Small wicker baskets—full—12 of them—one for each disciple; bread for them and more people; more than enough!

We aren't accustomed to such spectacular happenings, but we do know what it's like to rebuild hundreds of homes destroyed by some disaster. We know what it's like to welcome people into worship along with Christian fellowship and learning where they find joy, love, hope, and forgiveness. We know what it's like to partner with Christian sisters and brothers to sponsor food pantries and other caregiving ministries. In all of these, would we not conclude that all are filled with new life and hope? Elsewhere in the Gospels, we find the writers telling us about Jesus' great commission. Here in this text, we find them giving us a story with Jesus' great assignment!

As a fund-raiser, one congregation hosted a spaghetti supper for a local high school boosters club. The evening of the supper was wintry and treacherous. So the attendance for the supper was less than anticipated, but the spaghetti didn't diminish. Spaghetti is like tuna fish—it goes a long way. That spaghetti not only served the high school boosters club, but it also provided an after-worship meal for the congregation the next morning which happened to be Sunday. And still there was spaghetti! So, they shared the remaining spaghetti with the residents in the local Rescue Mission. Some thought it was a mini miracle. No one did the math. But clearly, all ate and were filled. Through the promise in a congregation's giftedness—in service to the community, in service to congregational life, and in service to the less fortunate and needy, there was more than enough. They fulfilled Jesus' great assignment.

Galilee is really a very small space. 50 miles from north to south; 25 miles from east to west. Historians tell us that in the New Testament era, there were over 200 villages and towns in that area, none with less than 15,000 people. How does a person get away from people for any length of time in such a thickly populated area? The 8 miles across Lake Galilee to the east could bring anyone to a quieter section of the lake front. So Jesus embarked with his disciples in a boat for them all to get away. They had been inundated with ministering to people. But getting away wasn't to be. People saw them leave; so they hurried around the lakeshore adding people as they went. When Jesus and the disciples arrived at their retreat destination, crowds had gathered along the shore. When they saw them, Mark tells us that Jesus ordered the disciples to keep on

rowing? No! He told the disciples that he just wasn't up to more people? No! The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus was immediately moved with compassion. Yes!! His sense of care identified with the people. They are compared to sheep without a shepherd—those with no one to lead them nor care for them. So Jesus extended his ministry to their needs—instructing them; healing their illnesses; demonstrating in God's great assignment for him.

No one watched the time. As evening began to appear on the horizon, Jesus' disciples realized that they would be in trouble if something didn't change. Dusk was starting to set in; supper was long overdue; stomachs were starting to growl. No vending machines or fast-food restaurants were nearby. So, being the practical persons they were, Jesus' disciples told him, "This is a sticky situation. They're hungry, and so are we. We're tired too! And, Jesus, you must also be very tired. Send the crowds on their way so they can buy food for themselves in the villages."

But that wasn't to be either. To the very practical suggestion to send the crowds away, Jesus responded, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat!" "Did we hear him right? He wants us to provide for everyone's supper?" Those disciples couldn't believe their ears. Without hesitation, they told Jesus in plain terms, "We only have 5 loaves and 2 fish here, nothing else. It would take the wages from 200 days to feed this crowd!" Then unfolded a miracle of promise where there was more than enough. Can you imagine the joyful satisfaction—the uplift in faith which those disciples received when they realized that everyone ate and was filled. And not only that, they gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers! Discovering that they were gifted with promise, the disciples began to catch a vision for extending Jesus' table.

As Jesus engaged with people, they would discover how they are gifted with promise. "I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly," he was remembered as saying. "In as much as you have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, educated the ignorant, visited the sick and imprisoned, and more, you have done it to me." Jesus filled his judgment parable with hope and promise when the table is extended. It too is a parable of Jesus' great assignment.

Jesus graced life with love for people. Even when he critiqued religious leaders for their hypocrisy, he did that out of love for them and those they served. Love for people was Jesus' giftedness with promise. On numerous occasions, the Gospel writers remembered him as being moved with compassion. One of the earliest descriptions of Jesus by Apostle Peter in the Book of Acts identifies Jesus as one who "went about doing good." (Acts 10:38) The stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes are among those stories remembered for Jesus' compassion. Feeding the 5,000 is one of very few stories presented in all four Gospels. It evidently carried powerful significance for the early Christian community. Not only does it convey overtones of the Eucharistic meal which Jesus shared with his disciples at the end of his ministry, it also connects

to the banquet imagery associated with the coming Kingdom of God. It is a story that challenges Jesus' disciples with the great assignment of his compassion.

As I have journeyed among the Brethren as moderator over the past two years and really for all of my 64 years of living, I have come to believe that we carry a passionate connection to this assignment to extend Jesus' table. Extending Jesus' table has moved the Brethren into foreign lands and neighboring communities with the Gospel story; it has fostered the creation and service of Heifer Project, BVS, workcamps, and Disaster Response; it has stimulated higher education in colleges and universities established by Brethren leaders including a denominational seminary for the training of pastors and church leaders. Extending Jesus' table has brought some to the halls of government advocating on behalf of the poor, and it has stimulated others to serve in food pantries, child care centers, and beneficial local ministries. Extending Jesus' table has found fresh meaning for those who advocate and serve in peacemaking, no longer satisfied to simply oppose war. Extending Jesus' table has given the Brethren opportunities to join with other Christians and even non-Christians in the relief of human suffering and ecumenical endeavors of significant proportions. Extending Jesus' table has challenged Brethren to invite those of varying cultures to come to the Savior's table. When I visited the Church of North India and the India Brethren last October, I learned how these who trace their roots to Brethren missions are discovering with renewed vigor what it means to extend Jesus' table in their own communities. And above all, extending Jesus' table challenges us to ask: How do we let Jesus' table be a place to invite and welcome people to follow Him, to take Him seriously, and in traditional language to come to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of life?

Imagine for a few moments just what Jesus' table must look like. It may really be any table—small, large, long, short, wooden, plastic, metal. It may sparkle with the sheen of polish, or it may exhibit a worn dullness. Perhaps it's even covered with a cloth. Or maybe it's nothing more than a cloth spread on the ground. But it isn't the table itself that draws our attention. It's what's on the table and what happens at the table. At a table, people meet each other; at a table, people receive what will feed them for the journey—meat and potatoes, pizza and salad, pasta and veggies, brownies and ice cream at least if it's associated with Brethren! We've had ice cream at our version of Jesus' table for over a hundred years!

But Jesus' table is laden with more than food and fellowship for mealtime. Jesus' table is a table of grace, filled with the giftedness of the Holy for human life, prepared in the kitchens and with the skills of love. At Jesus' table, people meet one another and discover the nourishing effect of grace-gifted living. In Romans and Galatians, Apostle Paul accentuates the grace of Jesus' table: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." (Romans 5:1-2) In Jesus Christ, we discover how we are grace-gifted through that Holy Presence to us. We are created in God's image with longing for

the Holy—a longing for a table of grace. As we trust God’s love in Christ, we share in what nourished that longing. Christ presents a table of grace. Christ aligns humankind with the Holy justifying us and taking away our sin—whatever distances humankind from the Holy, from being grace-gifted.

In Jesus Christ, the Holy One gives us a table gifted with the empowering love and presence of grace, gifted with the beauty and favor present in forgiveness, peacemaking, sharing, welcoming, and rejoicing. As you imagine Jesus’ table, how is it spread with such culinary delights of grace? How is your image of Jesus’ table a place to learn to forgive because God is a God of forgiveness, and because God and possibly others have forgiven you? As you imagine Jesus’ table, how is it a place to learn to share because your Creator God and others have shared life with you? How is your vision of Jesus’ table a place to learn to make peace because Jesus is the source of peacemaking? How is your picture of Jesus’ table a place to welcome strangers because you have also been welcomed as a stranger? Do you imagine Jesus’ table as a place to rejoice because as children sometimes sing “all God’s critters have a place in the choir”? A grace-filled and grace-gifted table—filled and gifted with the culinary blessings of the Holy! At Jesus’ table, we interact to receive the effects of grace and to be empowered in grace. Those who come are transformed. They leave the table as different persons with new instructions, new commitments, and new relationships. Through the grace of Jesus’ table, people become more to us than they may appear.

We struggle with the grace present at Jesus’ table. When we underestimate how we are gifted with promise, we may miss opportunities to extend that table. When we overemphasize the table manners, some people may question whether they can be accepted at the table. If the discipleship to be learned at Jesus’ table is seen as so perfect, some may simply stay away. When we extend Jesus’ table, we may discover growing diversity around that table. Not everyone will behave the same, regardless of the table manners that are expected. Not everyone at the table will think, speak, or even believe the same. But what transforms that diversity and that struggle is the host—Jesus Christ. We find unity and identity at the table, not in our uniformity, but through our oneness in the host Jesus Christ. And out of that oneness, we center in our common focus and our common assignment.

When I first came to Jesus’ table as a 10-year old child, it was in response to a simple invitation at the close of VBS when those who wanted to follow Jesus were invited to step forward. It was an opportunity to say that yes, I belong at this table. Later and throughout life and ministry, I would learn how to be present, how to interact, and how to serve both at and from Jesus’ table. Sometimes, at Jesus’ table, we simply want to enjoy being together, to offer our love for one another, to give praise to God, and to receive the blessings of grace. Those times renew our giftedness with promise in God’s grace. At other times, we seek to be sent – going to extend the table with its grace and peace to other places and people as well as to invite others to come and

share the table. Apostle Paul called Jesus' disciples "Ambassadors for Christ." As those ambassadors, gifted with promise in God's grace, we participate in Jesus' great assignment to extend His table.

In the daily devotional booklet The Word in Season (June , 2011), Melody Beckman Eastman writes her experience with extending Jesus' table.

"When I was 13, my dad gave my mom a modest diamond ring for Christmas. It was beautiful—because it represented my dad's deep love after many years of marriage. When Mom died, the ring came to me. I wear it often; I treasure what it represents.

"I have already promised Mom's ring to my daughter. I know she will take good care of it. Sometimes, even now, I hand it to her to wear for a while. It looks lovely on her hand.

"The grace and hope we find in Jesus is also a treasure, and not one to be protected by hiding it away. How much more important to pass on that treasure of faith and good news we have received! To place it in the hands of our children, and our friends, and even through our actions into the hands of those who don't know us well. If we are afraid that we're not very good at taking care of something so important, the Holy Spirit is here to help us—to both keep and pass on this amazing gift."

Over 50 years ago, I helped my parents construct our family vacation and hunting cabin in the mountains of western Augusta County, Virginia. The inside walls were paneled with knotty-pine lumber. My father hired a very skilled carpenter to also construct a dining table of knotty-pine boards. It is a table about 4 ft. by 6 ft. in three sections with each end as a drop-down leaf but the end leaves were always up. My parents and their friends and now our family have eaten many wonderful meals around that table. I recall having up to 10 or so eating together. It was a bit crowded, but the nourishment of food, conversation, and fellowship fed the souls of us all. Those who gathered as family or as hunting and fishing friends were most welcome. Sometimes at the last minute, an unexpected person would show up. This table was a place of welcome and nourishment even though limited in the number it would accommodate. Sometimes, we make Jesus' table is like that table—a place with limited accommodation, but still a table of grace.

At my wife's home in Pennsylvania, the dining table serves not only her parents on a day to day basis, but sometimes it is extended to accommodate family. When I first joined the family, there were 5 persons around that table—her parents, my future wife, her brother, an inquiring future son-in-law plus a grandfather at weekday lunches. Over the next thirty years, the family expanded with our two daughters and son, their spouses and our four grandchildren; the brother's wife with her three daughters, future son-in-laws and two grandchildren. With each new person,

an additional plate needed to be set at the table. Soon more leaves were added to the table, until it would accommodate twenty or more persons of various generations, gender, and interests. Occasionally there was a guest present who was totally foreign to the family. Some of us came from other parts of the country where foods and eating patterns varied. But they extended the table because they knew that as family we all were gifted with the promise of our common life. We shared a common table; we joined in common prayer together; and we engaged in diverse conversation with each other. Our life vocations and pursuits varied, but the common connection as family held us together even as we extended the table. Sometimes, Jesus' table becomes such a place with growing accommodation.

When Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* over two centuries ago, he began by writing that it was the best of times and it was the worst of times. As we begin this Annual Conference, some of us may be asking whether this is the best of times or the worst of times for the CoB. But whether it is the best or the worst of times really isn't the issue. The issue is whether we will discover how we are gifted with promise in Jesus Christ and will extend Jesus' table. Whether this is the best or the worst of times, in the grace of God, it is a time of opportunity to recognize the giftedness of God's grace and ask how that giftedness extends through either of the two tables like I just described—a table with limited accommodations and a table with increasing accommodations. Jesus' table isn't necessarily limited to one or the other. Both tables may be tables of grace as they fit different places, purposes, and people. Jesus' table may be either but unless it is a table of grace, neither will really be Jesus' table.

I've never attended a picnic for 5 to 10,000 people. The logistics seem overwhelming. But a picnic it was—bread and fish. More than enough from very meager resources. What would it have been like to have witnessed that great picnic, larger than our Annual Conference? At that picnic, Jesus gave his disciples an amazing assignment. In our congregations today, he continues to give us that same amazing assignment: People do not need to go away—you give them something to eat. The assignment is clear. Whether it is the food of body or the food of soul, implementing the assignment is limited only by our imagination. Tables of varying sizes and accommodation, but each may be gifted with the promise of God's grace and love in Jesus Christ. What joy will fill the life of the Brethren, in congregational and district life and even in Annual Conference, when we center in being gifted with promise in the grace of God and together extend Jesus' table with the vision of that grace!

(Move into experience with bread.)