



BIBLE STUDY

HUNGRY HEARTS

by Audrey Novak Riley

Introduction

We all know the story: A crowd of people follows Jesus out to the countryside, and by the time evening rolls around they're all hungry. The disciples tell Jesus to send the people away so they can go get supper in town, and he answers, "You give them something to eat."

All four gospels give us this story. Three of them give us the command from Jesus in exactly the same words: "You give them something to eat" (Matthew 14:16; Mark 6:37; Luke 9:13). Is Jesus talking to *us*?

Hymn

"We Come to the Hungry Feast" *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 479

Prayer

*Blessed are you, O Lord our God,
who brought forth all creation with
a word.*

You give us food for another day:

Blessed are you forever!

*We beg you to pour out food for all
who hunger*

this day and always

*that all peoples may praise you
in every language,*

*through your Son, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you*

and the Holy Spirit,

One God for ever and ever.

Amen.

Satisfaction at the Table

Have you ever had a really satisfying meal? I mean *really* satisfying, the kind that doesn't just nourish your body but delights your mind and your heart and your soul? What was it like? Who was there? Where was it, and what was that place like?

I can describe a meal like that—it was a recent Thanksgiving at my house. Some old friends were in town and my husband and I were delighted to have them join us at our table. My husband made dinner (he's a really good cook), and I got

out the wedding china and set the table as prettily as I know how. We prayed together, we ate, we talked about what we were thankful for, we caught up on everyone's news, and then after dinner, we lingered over coffee and talked some more. We had plenty of leftovers to send home with our friends, and even so, we still had enough for turkey sandwiches and pumpkin pie the next day. It was a deeply satisfying experience.

Let's Talk About It

1. What do you think made that experience so satisfying?
2. When did you have a meal that satisfying? What was it like? Tell the person next to you about it.
3. How did that meal satisfy your mind? Your heart? Your soul?

People on the Edge

Now let's turn to the gospel according to Matthew, chapter 14, where we'll hear about another very satis-

fying meal. As we listen, let's keep in mind what's been going on. King Herod has beheaded John the Baptist. On receiving the news of the murder of his cousin and forerunner, Jesus gets into a boat with his disciples, hoping to have some time alone, maybe hoping to lie low until the king calms down—but the many other people who had loved and honored their prophet John leave their homes and villages and wait for Jesus on the shore.

As the text is read aloud, imagine yourself in the scene as one of the many townspeople who have gone out to the water's edge to wait for Jesus.

READ MATTHEW 14:13–16.

Let's Talk About It

4. John the Baptist was important to you and your family and friends. What are your emotions as you hear of his death?
5. When you leave your house to wait for Jesus on the shore, what are you hoping for?

The Scripture is silent on what was going through the people's minds and hearts at this moment, but we can imagine that they were not only filled with grief, they were horrified. Their scandalous ruler Herod had murdered the prophet who had been foretold centuries before by Isaiah, the prophet who had called them to confess their sins and be baptized for repentance, for God's reign was very near (read Matthew 3:1–11). (See "A Wild and Crazy Guy," p. 18.)

The people had high expectations of their kings, always remembering how God had favored King David (read Psalm 89:19–29). And this disgraceful excuse for a ruler had vilely murdered their own prophet—God's own prophet! Disappointment is far too mild a word for what the people must have felt. What an appalling end for the prophet. What a brutal insult to the people and to their faith. And there was nothing they could do about it. Herod was backed by the power of Rome.

What Jesus Tells the People

So the crowd huddles around Jesus, who has compassion on them. The gospel also tells us that he heals their sick—and it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to imagine that he comforts the heartsick and grief-stricken as well.

When the disciples point out that it's getting late, he tells them to give the people something to eat and has them bring what little food they have to him. Then he tells the people to sit down on the grass. The evangelist's Greek word translated here as "sit down" is actually *anaklinos*—to lean back, to recline. That's what we're going to take a closer look at today.

Why does Jesus tell the people to stretch out on the grass? It must be significant. What could it mean?

For that, we have to look to the culture around Jesus and his neighbors.

The Greeks (and then the Romans) who had ruled that corner of the world for centuries loved dinner parties, which they called symposiums or conviviums (or, to be precise, *symposia* and *convivia*). They held banquets for occasions sacred and secular, large and small. Families, neighborhood associations, religious groups, nobles and their followers—everyone loved dinner parties. People even formed clubs whose purpose was to hold banquets and share the expenses.

In that culture, the ideal dinner party was a gathering of equals, coming together to enjoy not only good food and fine wine in pleasant surroundings, but most importantly, the pleasure of each other's company and conversation. But dinner parties meant much more than just fun with friends and families. That pleasure, the joy shared around the table, was a sacred thing in that culture. It was the presence of the divine.

Likewise, Jesus' own Jewish people had a centuries-long tradition of coming together to celebrate with food and drink and conversation and prayer. The Passover feast that Jews still celebrate today goes all the way back to Old Testament times, more than a thousand years

before Jesus' time. Neither the Jews' nor the Greeks' banquets looked like the dinner parties we see on the TV show "Downton Abbey," with elegantly dressed men and women sitting side by side around a long table, with the host and hostess at either end and silent servants standing behind. (Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, you can read Emily Post's elaborate rules for hosting dinner parties and give yourself the shivers.)

No, the dinner parties that Jesus' friends and neighbors knew went like this: The host would have the servants arrange a few backless, armless couches (think of beach lounges or futons) end to end in a U shape. Each couch would have a low table next to it where servants would place food and wine for each guest. As the guests entered, servants would wash their feet and others would show them to their places. The guests would stretch out on their couches, reclining on their left sides, leaning on their elbows, supported by cushions.

Both Jews and Greeks saw a very special meaning in that reclining posture: That was how free people ate. That was how noble people ate. Servants ate seated so that they could act quickly if their masters called. Children ate sitting on their parents' couches at their feet; a student would honor a teacher by sitting on the end of the teacher's couch at his feet. Reclining was a position of honor.

That meaning is actually enshrined in the Jewish people's Talmud, the commentary on the Scripture that was first written down not long after Jesus' time, codifying traditions and practices that had already been in place for generations, if not centuries. At the Passover feast, the celebration of God leading the people out of slavery, all Jews, rich or poor or middling, are to recline at table as the free people God chose them to be.

By having the people recline to eat, Jesus is telling them that no matter how their ruler had grieved and insulted them by murdering their beloved prophet John, they are still the free and noble people God had chosen them to be, and the people would have

understood what he was telling them. He is doing the opposite of what Herod had done—Jesus is treating the people and their faith and traditions with respect. By sending his disciples among them as servants at a feast, he is treating the people as honored guests. (See "Taste and See," p. 12.)

Let's Talk About It

6. Imagine yourself as one of the people reclining on the grass. How do you feel as Jesus directs the disciples to bring food to you?
7. How do we honor people in our culture? Have you ever treated someone as an honored guest? What did it look like? How did it feel?
8. Have you ever been treated as an honored guest? What did that look like? How did you feel about that?

Jesus Says What?

What are the disciples thinking when they ask Jesus to send the people into town to buy food? It certainly would have been the practical thing to do, wouldn't you agree? After all, there were thousands of people lying on the grass (read Matthew 14:21), and only a few disciples (read Matthew 14:22; they all fit into one boat). But Jesus says no! (See "You Give Them Something To Eat," p. 26.)

Let's Talk About It

9. How do you suppose the disciples felt when they looked out over that vast hungry crowd, all looking to them? How do you suppose they felt when they heard Jesus say, "You give them something to eat"? How would you have felt? What would you have done?

Let's take that question a little further into our own time and place. Does your congregation sponsor a soup kitchen, food pantry, or something similar? Then

you're certainly aware that more and more people are depending on our help.

According to the national food-bank organization Feeding America, one in six Americans does not have regular access to enough food to sustain a healthy life—that's more than 50 million of our neighbors. Households with children report a much higher rate of food insecurity than households without—more than 20 percent of American households with children don't have regular access to enough food to stay healthy. (See "The Food Stamp Challenge," p. 22.)

And more and more of our neighbors in this situation are looking to us, Jesus' present-day disciples. And Jesus repeats what he said then: "You give them something to eat."

How do we feel about that? How do we act on that? Can we treat our neighbors as lovingly and respectfully as Jesus treated the crowds who gathered around him at the seashore?

And how are we going to feed all those hungry people with only five loaves and two little fishes?

That's what we'll talk about in the next session of "All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly."

Prayer

*Blessed are you, Holy God,
for you comfort those who mourn
and you feed those who are hungry.
Open wide your hand
and satisfy the needs of every living creature,
for we all wait upon your everlasting goodness.
This we ask through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Hymn

"You Satisfy the Hungry Heart" (ELW 484) 

Audrey Novak Riley serves the church as associate program director for ELCA World Hunger.

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LEADER GUIDE

HUNGRY HEARTS

by Audrey Novak Riley

Introduction

At the end of this three-session Bible study, we will act on Jesus' command both locally and globally. Ask participants and others in the congregation to do two things: bring groceries for a local food pantry, and bring monetary gifts for ELCA World Hunger (make checks out to Women of the ELCA and write ELCA World Hunger on the memo line). We will bless both these offerings at the closing prayer of the third study session.

Spread the word about the food drive and offering well ahead of time. You might also arrange for someone with a car or van to take the groceries to the food pantry.

A few days before each session begins, ask someone to serve as reader—someone different for each of the three study sessions, if possible. Let her know that her assignment is simple: to wait for your signal, read her text aloud to the group, and then keep silence.

Print out the Bible passages noted below, each on a separate page, making sure to end with Jesus' words, "give them something to eat." (The verse containing those words may go on, but we want to stop right there.) Give the printout to each reader well in advance and ask her to look it over so that she can proclaim it well.

Don't supply the whole group with printed copies of the texts. We want people to hear the living words spoken aloud, as they are able; for those who may have difficulty hearing, plan ahead and make some extra copies.

Session 1: Matthew 14:13–16

Session 2: Mark 6:32–37a

Session 3: Luke 9:10–13a

SESSION 1: Hungry Hearts

Satisfaction at the Table

This section is an icebreaker. Questions 1–3 are designed to help people start talking together about a happy memory of a satisfying meal. Some points to bring out include the pleasure of spending time with friends and the delight of the hosts in arranging a good meal for their friends. You might suggest other satisfying meals besides sit-down dinners with guests—pizza parties with the youth group, picnics with families, hotdogs at the ballpark with the grandkids, and so on.

People on the Edge

Discussion questions 4 and 5 have no right or wrong answers. They are simply to help people put themselves in the scene.

Some possible answers about the people's feelings might include bereft, sad, grieving, and also horrified, disgusted, helpless, oppressed, angry.

What Jesus Tells the People

This section brings in some historical information to back up the writer's theory about why Jesus had the people lie down on the grass.

Some readers may find the discussion of the Greek symposium interesting, and if so, you might tell them that the classic Greek symposium featured two parts: first, the meal, and second, the entertainment (which could range from lofty philosophical discussions to music to joke-telling contests to betting on whether a guest could fling a drop of wine into the center of the room).

A servant called the *symposiarch* decided how much wine each guest was to drink and how much water to mix into that wine—it was considered barbaric to drink unmixed wine. That servant was in charge of a large common vessel of wine in the center of the room, from which servants would fill pitchers to replenish the guests' cups. The symposiarch would mix more water into the wine if philosophical discussions were on the agenda and less water if the entertainment would feature joke-telling.

Discussion questions 6–8 have no right or wrong answers, but the hope is to suggest that the people were comforted by Jesus' treating them with respect.

Jesus Says What?

Discussion question 9 again has no right or wrong answer.

The discussion of hunger in our own communities may lead to lively conversation and that's fine. If the conversation gets off-track into questions of why people are hungry in the community, you might want to gently steer it back into our response to hunger, always remembering Christ's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. This might be a good time to discuss the article "The Food Stamp Challenge" on page 22.

ELCA World Hunger offers many informative and free downloadable activity toolkits on their website (www.elca.org/hunger/toolkits) that might be a good program for another time.

The ELCA World Hunger video series, free to order, download or view online at www.elca.org/hunger/videos, includes the story of a congregation in Seattle that welcomes people to feast at their table. You might show that video and talk some more about how that congregation's hospitality works, and how it affects all the people featured in the story.



PURPOSE STATEMENT OF WOMEN OF THE ELCA

As a community of women created in the image of God, called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world.