Sharing Food and Sharing Life

“What has come into being with him was life...” —(John 1:3b-4a)

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This meditation/study is centered on John 17.20-21a, looking at that passage in relation to the full chapter and in the context of the whole gospel of John. Persons may wish to read John 17 in advance.

Do you remember times of sharing a meal with family or friends when life seemed especially full—perhaps an impromptu picnic or a church potluck, maybe a family gathering or a reunion of old friends? Did you ever receive a meal from someone that changed you or your ideas in an unanticipated way?

In chapters 13-17 of the gospel of John, we find ourselves at supper with Jesus and his disciples. We are placed in the midst of an intimate conversation between Jesus and his closest followers and friends. It is Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, so the realities of betrayal, loss, grief, and suffering are thick in the air—and those realities are inseparable from the realities of friendship, joy, and love.

Sharing food and sharing life are closely linked in John’s gospel. When we hear or read John’s gospel, we often find ourselves eating and drinking with Jesus. We come to know Jesus as he provides wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2.1-12), seeks water from a woman at a well (John 4), shares a meal with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (12.1-8), and shares a meal with his disciples and with others. It is Jesus’ relation with God that permeates and is made known in the sustenance of meals and the sharing of sorrow and joy; it is life that is finally inseparable from the realities of hunger, thirst, sorrow, and joy known in the whole world.

When we read John 17 today, we are placed before God and in the midst of life and living. There is good reason why the repeated prayer, “that they may be one,” has been understood as the charter of the modern ecumenical and interfaith movement. To pray and seek that “they may be one” means to recognize the circulation of God’s life in which we already dwell, as Christians and as humans. That prayer will send us to unanticipated places—no doubt to where persons have been reviled, incarcerated, impoverished, disregarded, disdained. It may also open us to unexpected changes—perhaps to new forms of forgiveness and love, new relationships, new prayers, new understandings of the Source and Giver of Life. The reality of shared life with others in God means that we are always susceptible to being changed by friends and strangers, to being loved and betrayed, even crucified and resurrected. Life goes out from God and returns transformed as it is shared with and for others.

Does the image of circulation help you to think about your own and your church’s relationship with God, with Jesus and his disciples, and with others? How does the prayer for unity change and challenge you?

For further exploration


A longer essay by Rabbi Heschel that covers many of the same themes in greater depth is available online: “No Religion is an Island”, given November 10, 1965 as Heschel’s inaugural lecture as the Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. Heschel explores “On what basis do we as people of different religious commitments meet one another?”

that is interpreted by the language of parent and child here. Jesus’ relation with God is so close that it is as if a part of God’s self had been born or begotten into the world. The relationship is so close that any line between “mine” and “yours” seems to dissolve (17:10).

But, as intimate as the relationship between Jesus and God may be, it is inclusive of others, not exclusive. Similarly, as intimate as the relationships among Jesus and his closest followers may be, they serve as the basis for further inclusion, not exclusion. When Jesus shares food or water with friends and strangers, those relations are deepened and multiplied. Their hunger is satisfied, their sorrows and joys are shared, and they are emboldened to do the same—share food and life—with and for others. The life they share multiplies, like loaves and fishes, to stretch to familiars and strangers.

This might be a good moment to read together the John 17:20-21a passage and surrounding verses. Read John 17:18-23 together out loud. What do you notice about the relationships in this passage?

Relationship with God generates conversation and connection. The connections depicted in this passage are almost boggling; the passage is filled with pronouns (I, you, me, them, we, they) and their interrelation. For example, look again at John 17:23.

There is, we might say, a circulation of the life and glory of God through these relations. In the gospel of John, the life of God first flows outward, just as Jesus’ prayer itself does in John 17. “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:18). John’s high christology portrays Jesus as having been in the presence of God “before the world existed” (17:5), echoing the opening verses of the gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God....” But life also flows back to God. John 17 anticipates Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection (John 18-20) as returning to God (see 17:11). Just as the heart pumps out blood to the body’s extremities, nourishing the body’s work of walking, reaching, thinking, touching, and then blood returns, changed, to the heart through the veins—so John pictures the life of God flowing out into the world and then returning to the heart of God.

John’s gospel places Jesus’ ministry in a middle space and time, between an eternal beginning and an everlasting return. That middle space and time is where the person Jesus teaches, eats and drinks, experiences betrayal and loyalty, shares sorrow and love, and shares life with his disciples and with a multitude of others. The middle space and time—the far reaches of the circulatory system, to stick with the previous metaphor—is also where the disciples are called and sent, to the whole the world of which we are a part.

The unity that Jesus shares with God, his disciples, and the world is life itself. It is life given by God that permeates and is made known in the sustenance of meals and the sharing of sorrow and joy; it is life that is finally inseparable from the realities of hunger, thirst, sorrow, and joy known in the whole world.

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