

WHEAT THRESHING AND LOVE FEASTS

I grew up on an 80 acre farm in Northern Michigan in the 1960's. All the farms in our community were small and the farmers often shared farm implements as a way of cutting costs. My father and uncle bought tractors, combines and other implements together. This sharing of farm implements became an important means of survival for small farmers.

In my father's youth sharing of resources took on the form of "wheat threshing crews". Farmers banded together and went from farm to farm assisting in the harvest of grain. Since much of the labor was manual a group of twenty to twenty-five laborers was necessary in order to harvest quickly. My father tells the story of mealtimes during wheat threshing. The tables were laden with food of all kinds and twenty to twenty-five laborers sat around a common table. It was during this time that stories were told and younger members of the "wheat threshing crews" were indoctrinated into the ways of farming and threshing. One can imagine the traditions, both good and bad, that were passed on!

Storytelling is a primary means by which the biblical tradition and story is also communicated. Scripture may not contain the stories of "wheat threshing" but many other truths are communicated through story and drama. One such story is that of the Passover found in Exodus 12. This chapter gives detailed instructions on how to celebrate the deliverance of the Hebrew people from the Egyptians. Exodus 12 then summarizes the reason for the Passover observance. "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" (NIV - Exodus 12: 24-28)

The story of the Passover is renewed and reworked in the Gospels' account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Jesus' coming initiates a deeper and fuller understanding of the meaning of the Passover. The Gospels vary in the details but, taken as a whole, present an amazing drama of how the story of God's redemptive activity continues.

The Church of the Brethren practice of the Love Feast is rooted deeply in the Old Testament practice of the Passover and in the accounts of the Last Supper contained in the Gospels. The Love Feast becomes a way linking us with deliverance of the ancient Hebrews celebrated in Passover. The Love Feast also links us with the story of Jesus' redemptive work in the New Testament and encourages us to tell our own stories of how Jesus continues to work in our lives. The question of Exodus 12 might be stated like this. When our children ask us, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'This is the story of Jesus and how we live as faithful disciples.'

The Love Feast, of course, is not the only way by which the story of Jesus is communicated. However, like the “wheat threshing crews” of my father the Love Feast contains dramatic elements which communicate the meaning of faith to all those participating and watching. The practice and order of the Love Feast may vary between congregations yet several common elements are found which invite us to a deeper walk with Christ.

We begin with a time of confession and acknowledgement of our common sinfulness and need of God’s grace. Confession means agreement with God regarding the state of our lives. It is that confession which brings us together as a body. We come not out of a sense of accomplishment or pride but rather as brothers and sisters seeking God’s grace, bound together by our mutual need for God’s forgiveness and empowerment.

That sense of common need moves us to a desire to reach out to our brothers and sisters in concrete ways. We reach out not from a sense of superiority or being better than the other person but rather seeking to genuinely minister in the name of Christ. The practice of foot washing becomes the next act of the drama moving us from confession to service. Foot washing, in Jesus’ time, was a concrete act of service preformed by the servants of the household. It was practical in nature as it helped soothe and clean the feet after a hard day’s work of walking with sandals or with bare feet. The practice of foot washing continues to contain much power even with our cultural distance from the practices of Jesus’ time. We pledge to each other that we will seek each other’s best interests. We will set aside our own interests in order that others might be served in the name of Christ.

Serving others in the name of Christ leads naturally to opening the table of hospitality. It is not enough to serve in the name of Jesus but rather we are called to welcome all to be part of the table. It is sometimes easy to serve but a whole lot harder to include. The serving of the meal of grapes, broth or other simple foods moves us beyond service to inclusion. Psalm 23 contains images of God as our host whose table is open to all. The Old Testament laws of hospitality meant that as long as I was present at my host’s table I was guaranteed safety and plenty. God promises us that kind of protection and sustenance to all who come. We can do no less.

The drama of the Love Feast comes full circle with the serving of the bread and cup in the name of Christ. We begin with confession of our sins and end with confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. We recognize that the practices of confession, service and hospitality are made possible by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We eat the bread and drink the cup in humble gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf.

When our children ask us, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘This is the story of Jesus and how we live as faithful disciples.’ That is still our question and answer.

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