

**FROM FARM TO LORD'S TABLE:
A CASE STUDY FOR FIELD EDUCATION'S SPRING REFLECTION**

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Context

The ignored reality of how food actually gets to a dining room table begins with a marginalized group of Latino immigrants called “farm workers.” When hearing the words “farm” or “agriculture,” some consumers may have a cute image of a red barn and a small family who produces enough milk, fruit, and grains to feed thousands. But sadly, the way “big agro” (the large agricultural business) gets its food grown from many fields, which are seeded and tended to by farm workers, and sometimes their children! Though estimates vary, there are likely over a million farm workers in the United States.¹ These workers do not have adequate housing, often get serious poison-related diseases from direct contact with pesticides, and do not get paid a living wage. To be a farm worker is to be practically enslaved in our modern world. They are discriminated against through poor pay and dangerous living conditions. Moreover, their isolation in the fields prevents them from gaining adequate aid to voice their needs and expectations. Fortunately, there has been some historical solidarity between farm workers and the Christian faith community since the 1920s. Through marches and financial giving to faith-based agencies like the National Farm Worker Ministry, American Christians have been able to work alongside farm workers in their pursuits of justice. Christians have tried to both support and feed those who grow the food that is set at the Eucharist (e.g. The Lord’s Supper, Communion).

Event

At a Day of the Dead gathering in November, I had the special opportunity to speak in front of forty farm worker rights supporters and seven farm workers. During the cultural celebration, a few recent obituaries were read for farm workers’ deceased children, who worked in the fields until death from heat exhaustion and machinery accidents. Needless to say, the

¹ More information may be found at the NFWM’s website: <http://nfwm.org/education-center/farm-worker-issues/>. Much of the generalizations of farm workers have a basis on this specific article put out by the NFWM.

context was incredibly depressing and discouraging. Knowing that I was asked to share a brief message about the hope engrained within the farm workers' rights movement, I tried to reincorporate the celebration theme. My words concerned the theology of resurrection. I outlined Christ's power coming in death to be noteworthy for this celebration of those who perished in the hard labors, for they became freed in their death from the oppressive institutions around us. In retrospect, my homily was marginally helpful to either the audience or myself.

The Day of the Dead Celebration opened up a moment of growth: I heard the stories of real farm workers and saw the literal scars of injustice up close. The issues I been writing about in curriculum came to life because I got to meet real oppressed people in the fields. After the ceremony, I spoke with three farm workers through their English translator, who shared their horror stories of racism, pesticide sickness, and sexual harassment. These men and women candidly shared about their role in tending crops. One woman told me that her minimal compensation did not allow her to buy the same crops she produced. Her comment, and the other stories, later led me to weep in my car, fumbling through personal thoughts about my role in privilege, systematic injustice, and general inequalities. Through the tears I realized that the Eucharist raised even greater questions for me to wrestle with afterwards, such as: Are there people serving the Lord's Table who are not rewarded with a transformative meal themselves? Even if I believe the Table is meant to exhibit equality (theological, social, economic, etc.), does it ever get filled with diverse occupants?

What do I see?

The core issues at stake are the sacrament² of the Eucharist and the church body. How can the Christian community thrive and feast on the elements of the Eucharist if require the

² Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who they are, where they are, and how they got There* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), Kindle E-Book. Jacobsen argues that a

blood, sweat, and oppression of farm workers? Moreover, should not the farm workers be joining them in worship at the table? Reading the Scriptures of the Old Testament that plea for listeners to be ethical agrarians (Leviticus 25, Amos 1-9) stands at odds with current food systems. Ellen Davis has explored the massive deviations of food systems, which have moved far away from the Judeo-Christian standard of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25).³ Her book *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* challenges the assertions that our current systems are helpful and healthy. Therefore, it is abundantly evident that gradual shift in Westernized, American culture has disrupted both the two bodies of Christ: the meal and the worshipping community.

The zeal for the Eucharist seems to go far back into church history, particularly with the host consecrations and art of the medieval period. The Catholic Catechism argued that sacraments like the Eucharist are when “God draws close” (Catholic Church, 1995). Even Protestant reformers found it quite important for Christian practice. Martin Luther believed it was way to ingest the presence of Christ⁴ and John Calvin thought its symbolic usage would prompt penitential remembrance.⁵ Bonhoeffer, a German, Protestant theologian in the 20th century believed, “Baptism incorporates us as members into the unity of the body of Christ. The Lord’s Supper keeps us in this community (koinōnia) with Christ’s body.”⁶ However you interpret the Eucharist and its meaning, it is evident that to live sacramentally is to experience God’s grace and to experience transformation. My high view of the meal has long been tied to

sacramental experience of the world is one that communicates grace. It is an invitation from God to become “more” than one already is and to enter into a new depth of love and fellowship with God and all of God’s creation. God’s sacramental engagement with humankind is never a matter of imposition. God does not force grace on anyone; it is an offer that must be actively received.

³ Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 80-100.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament*, 3, Luther’s Works, 37, edited by Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, Inc., 1961), 206.

⁵ John Calvin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. by John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 518-521, 525-529.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, Inc., 2001), 213.

the justice of God because I see the meal as the uniquely power-leveling function of the church. It is the ‘great equalizer.’ The Eucharist pushes American Christians, like myself, out of our materialistic, narcissistic and power-oriented norms, and into a people-oriented celebration. As Cavanaugh theorizes, we move from the consumers to the consumed food, so that we may become “active and creative participants in the material world.”⁷ But, can this really happen if everyone does not have the chance to be equalized through Christ?

Thus, if there is an unjust that harms others (e.g. farm workers), then all of the table’s participants are jeopardized. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” claimed, A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁸ So, if the Eucharistic gathering is to be a place of diversity and community, then the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine with one another matters greatly! To eat the bread and drink the wine with the poor and the rich, the person of color and the white individual, the banker and the beggar, the LGBT and the straight, the educated and those with special needs, is to enjoy the diversity of God. But, meeting the farm workers who actually prepare the food I eat, who are savagely misused by the system (which is fed by my economic decisions), has made me question if they also are the ones making the grapes, grains, and other parts of what later becomes the consecrated host. I am left wondering if my favorite sacrament actually is a social equalizer, or if it is solely another part of systematic injustice. Am I shackled to the controls of corporations and oppressive systems with only a façade of the table helping to liberate farm workers, others, and myself?

⁷ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 55-57. Rather than being consumers, we become consumed; this means that we Christians are being the bread, we are being fed by Christ and becoming the meal for others. The insight is groundbreaking, in that we see the meal and ourselves anew.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Penguin Group Publishing, 1964).

Why did this happen?

I feel the event happened because I needed to be reminded of social inequality. Staying at the office does not adequately keep me in touch with the grim realities of farm workers. My primary interaction brought to light the realities' of others entrapped in racist and dangerous jobs. Unlike other experiences I could have examined, I had the strongest emotional and intellectual response to this event.

How does scripture speak?

Other than the many adopted scriptures by social justice movements (Galatians 3, Micah 6:6-8, Luke 4), there is another passage that stands out in relation to food justice and the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 tells of a church in turmoil – some are getting drunk at the communal table and others do not have any left to eat. The Pauline author rebukes them, stating, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and the blood of the Lord” (11:27 NRSV). 1 Corinthians 11 concludes with warnings of judgment and more regulations for the rich congregants who are overeating. The biblical text, at a very basic and non-scholarly level is quite relatable to my questions. For it seems that the Lord’s Table may have always been contested and regularly surrounded by “violence” – extreme conflict that incites illness and death.⁹ And yet, in the middle of the conflict, there is still an open condemnation of over-gleaning and abuse. Thus, the scriptures speak to illuminate this issue of the table and to speak prophetically against injustice.

⁹ Rob Nixon, “Slow Violence and Environmental Storytelling,” *Nieman Storyboard*, accessed on December 1, 2014, <http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/slow-violence-and-environmental-storytelling/>. Nixon’s work, though this is just an abstract of his full book, suggests that to spread environmentalism, we need to find better ways to tell the stories of death, decay, and violence, associated with related issues. He uses the term “violence” to pin down the slow death of the planet from intentional human choices that harm it.

What is at stake theologically?

What the event, my questions, and 1 Corinthians 11 point to is the need for theology of the Eucharist within the context of strife. My Anabaptist roots likely have pushed me far away from using the term “violence” within something sanctioned by Jesus. However, the word serves as a fitting hyperbole. Violence appears in the thought of a church divided and abusing the meal (as in the Scripture) illustrates the conflict that can (and truly often does) stay around the table. Since the theological understandings of the sacrament and therefore the practicing community is at stake, I may need to explore a Christology that is functional in a violent and divided society, and even church community.

How might we respond?

My muddled re-shaping of both the Eucharist and the division within the Church in the United States ought to call for a re-envisioning of the sacrament. Seeing it as existing in zones of conflict and often violence (literal and hyperbolic) may enable its meaning to become stronger. If the meal becomes a unifying practice, one speaking against the violence perpetrated around and by the Church, then it calls farm workers and other marginalized groups forward to eat. A meal that names the injustices of how the food and drink got to the table may even better fight the ignorance that allows injustice to thrive. A meal that understands the context of conflict is more realistic and more powerful. Thus, a more intentional Eucharist practice of could challenge the assumptions of many people and allow congregations to strive towards unit, a unity found in the tantalizing tastes of bread and wine.

Collect

God of All People and The Land,

You often side with the poor and oppressed peoples of this world; please join and give power to the farm workers and their supporters. Grant me with a sense of justice through Your very own table by spiritually and physically feeding all people.

We ask this through Christ, who fed the 5000 and 4000, and who gave us a meal to remember and experience his presence often, in the name of compassion.

Amen.

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