

When hungers clash

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 11, 1998](#) issue

His name I have forgotten, but the image of him eating at our table is indelible. Every month on the first Sunday he would make his way from the back country to the city of Novi Sad, where my father was a pastor. A fellow Pentecostal, surrounded by a sea of hostile nonbelievers and Orthodox Christians, he came to our church for communion. After feasting at the Lord's Table, he joined our family for the Sunday meal.

A roughhewn figure, both intriguing and slightly menacing, he sat quietly, a bit hunched, across the table from me, then a teenage boy. A moustache which would put Nietzsche's to shame dominated his face. Even before the meal would start, my memory would play the sound of him eating at our table. It was the *sound* of my mother's soup leaping across a centimeter-wide chasm from his spoon through his moustache into his mouth. The climax of the week's menu, as Mary Douglas calls the Sunday lunch, was ruined.

"Hunger is hunger," wrote Karl Marx, "but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth." Hungers and the ways of satisfying them are thick with culture. They are laden not simply with what within a particular society lies on the spectrum between "highly cultured" and "barbaric," but also with cultural elements that separate discreet communities and protect their identities.

When our guest came, the clash of cultures played itself out as a clash of hungers. My parents never said anything, though I could sense their reservations about his manners. Yet it was also clear that they not only thought it important to invite him repeatedly, but also admired the robustness of his Christian commitment in spite of great adversity.

My parents kept extending the invitation because they thought one should not separate the Table of the Lord at which my father presided in the morning from the table of our home at whose head he was sitting at noon. I am not sure how much they knew about the original unity of the eucharistic celebration and the agape

meal, but they clearly practiced their inseparability. As the Lord gave his body and blood for sinners, so we ought to be ready to share something of our very selves with strangers. The circle of our table fellowship was opened up by the wounds of Christ, and a stranger was let in.

A meal offered is a gift given. In Luke 14:12-14 Jesus says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Hospitality ought not be part of an economy of exchange with superiors or equals, but of an economy of donation to the destitute and weak.

It is trite but true to say that giving is hard; we reluctantly part with our goods. But giving well is doubly hard. Every act of giving establishes a relation of asymmetry between the giver and the receiver; giving is grace, and the one who receives is dependent on and obliged to the one who gives. Marx attacked grace in the name of the recipient's independence. Nietzsche called it into question in the name of the recipient's self-respect. If these critics of grace have anything to teach, it is that the art of giving consists in knowing how to give without enslaving or humiliating the receiver.

When the gift is a shared meal, the art of giving is on the one hand made easier. The commonality of having the same elemental need satisfied with the same food around the same table diminishes the asymmetry between the giver and the receiver. At the same time, the very proximity of the receiver to the giver, who shares not only possessions but something of his or her very self, makes the giving more difficult. Since food and the customs surrounding eating are so heavily laden with culture, the proximity highlights differences between the giver and the receiver. If stark, the differences become uncomfortable, even hardly bearable. When hungry mutual strangers clash at the same table, it is easy for condescension, even disgust, to creep into the attitude of the giver toward the receiver.

Only love will cure the giver from the tendency to despise the receiver. The critical test of love is joy in the presence of the other. With our Sunday lunch guest, we did what Jesus commanded--invite for a meal those who are unable to give in return. But did we give our gift as we should have? For myself, I was all too happy about his

inability to return the favor. It was enough that we had done our duty and given him a meal; to receive a meal from him would have required virtue beyond my capacity. I was not a good enough host.

At its best, an invitation to a stranger to come to the table is a form of giving for the sake of the other--giving which, as such, does not expect a return, though it rejoices when it is "unexpectedly" given. Good givers are willing to enter the asymmetric relationship with the receiver through their giving without calculation that the giving will pay off. But they also feel shame--shame less about what they are doing than about the way the social relations are structured--that the relationship is not reciprocal. They are good givers precisely because they delight in the presence and desire the well-being of the receiver.