

Cemetery picnic: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

Chang Lee survived two brutal wars in his mother country, Korea. He lived through the dangers posed by Japanese bombs, Chinese howitzers, North Korean minefields and American carbines. But he did not survive an encounter with a mugger in the hallway of his own apartment in the U.S. He was brutally stabbed, and died at the age of 80.

Chang Lee's family were members of the parish I served in Queens. Two hundred people came to the funeral. Lessons and prayers were offered in English and Korean. The casket was set up like a Shinto shrine, with pictures of the deceased, flowers and two posters with Korean ideograms. One poster gave biographical details; the other, the 23rd Psalm.

A motorcade of 40 cars wended its way down the crowded Long Island Expressway to the cemetery. After the graveside committal, each family member bowed low before the casket in respect and deference to their new ancestor in the communion of saints. Then something remarkable happened. The entire funeral party began walking from the grave to a nearby grove of trees, where they spread out blankets, food and drink and had a picnic. One of the family came over to me and smiled, handing me a sandwich and a soft drink. "Eat and drink, pastor, enjoy! Life goes on!" And so it did. We ate and drank among the tombstones, celebrating life in a place of the dead transformed.

The elementary act of eating and drinking in the graveyard echoed that first Eucharist in the Garden of Eden. God took man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it, and then commanded, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden."

Eating and drinking is primal communion with God. The hunger of our first parents was for God, who made Adam and Eve priests and told them to bless all creation by acknowledging the Creator. Each animal, plant and seed was shot through with the presence of God. The life between the man and the woman, marking the end of their loneliness, was also a gift. Life was sacramental, with every moment, every morsel of food, every surprise of beauty leading directly to the Giver of all good gifts. The

entire world was Eucharist, with the human being receiving it from God and offering it to God by naming and tending creation. The humans were to bless, to name, to take responsibility; to eat and drink and partake with reverence and thanksgiving—that was the eucharistic life of humanity in the midst of God's creation.

But then the garden became a graveyard, a wilderness. When a former mayor of New York walked through the neighborhoods he used to ask residents, "How am I doing?" That is our question to the things of this world. Instead of offering the creation to God and receiving life from God through the creation, we look to creation to reflect and fill us. We are spiritual hypochondriacs, consumers of privatized religion, seekers of the salvation of our own souls and bodies. The graveyard is a hall of mirrors.

To us, people are objects, not subjects of their histories. We feel helpless and lack control over decisions that affect the life of our world. We've lost created solidarity, the collective power for naming and tending in the world. We argue over who will nurture our children, give them their communal stories, shape their public life. The red-and-blue state divide is a political hall of mirrors in which we cannot connect with each other. We make the private public and the public private. In the wilderness of the graveyard a poor person and a person of privilege never have to encounter one another.

Today we retreat from participation in decisions that shape our world into a narcissistic hall of mirrors. We have sold our God-given mandate to participate in the life of the world as worship of the Creator for a mess of privatized pottage. Even the Sunday eating and drinking is often a private affair, a picnic in the hall of mirrors, a catered escape from the world.

But Eucharist can still be a sign that Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith," has entered the wilderness, was tempted as we are, and remained faithful to his created vocation. Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" As the ministering angels served him, the wilderness and graveyard again became Eucharist in the garden.

In the eating and drinking the church becomes the eucharistic presence of Christ in the world. Those who have been filled with the presence of Christ in communion also see the presence of Christ in a picnic in the cemetery. The church in the world

understands that the reign of God, like an early shoot from a hidden seed, is breaking out in all the dark, anonymous corners of creation.

As creation is transformed at the altar in its journey with Christ to the Creator, God's people see all that lies before them with new eyes. The kingdom, though "not yet," is "even now." Long ago it was the fervent desire of the faithful to be buried near the graves of the martyrs. When people of means died they provided copious amounts of food to be placed on their graves, and expected the poor to visit the graves and eat and drink in the presence of the departed. It was also expected that the poor would offer prayers to the God of creation on behalf of the departed. And so—even now—in the eating and drinking and praying among the tombstones, life goes on, on this side of eternity and on the other.