Table Tales
by Maria Fee

What does Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann have in common with contemporary artist Theaster Gates? They both believe that beautiful things should be set out on the table that brings people together. The particular event Schmemann refers to is corporate Christian worship and its Eucharist. Here believers gather and welcome Christ into their midst. Gates, on the other hand, brings to his Soul Food Pavilion participants of varying socio-economic rank, who venture into his neighborhood for an artful Sunday dinner followed by discussions on race, economics, and power. One meal is religious, the other secular. This alone sets the two at odds. Indeed, the various theologies and historical legacies that surround the Eucharist should be enough to discourage any comparison. Yet, in admiration of Gates’ work, I feel the tug to follow the question, what does the Lord’s Supper have to do with this artist’s fanciful affairs?

By such a pursuit, I do not wish to minimize the sacred elements of the Christian meal. If anything, it is my hope that Gates’ work can generate new ideas and practices concerning our varied communal gatherings as Christians. Michael Skelley remarks how “If we cannot see God in the ordinary events of life,” in this case art, “we cannot expect that we will suddenly be able to see God when we gather to worship.” Hence, it is my goal to connect soul food fixings in Chicago’s South Side with the bread and cup of the early Christian Mediterranean world. These two social meals, distinct though they may be, share concerns that touch on ideas of presence,
justice, ritual, and transformation. Thus, this essay will culminate by addressing these notions for
the sake of contemporary Christian endeavors.

Soul Food Pavilion

Within the Archive House in the Chicago neighborhood of Grand Crossings, a series of
long wooden tables are set and dressed with hand thrown ceramic dinnerware. The room conveys
a rich sensuousness conferred through its generous use of refurbished wood and other redeemed
building materials. It recalls the minimal design sensibility of Dwell magazine crossed with art
studio ingenuity. The place feels comfortably worn and refreshingly playful. This is the welcome
setting for a series of dinners entitled Soul Food Pavilion, an aesthetic social practice constructed
and curated by the artist Theaster Gates.

Black Presence

Similar to many Christian liturgies, the event is anchored by a shared meal accompanied with
words that relate its significance. Music is included through the soulful sounds of Gates’
ensemble the Black Monks of Mississippi. Dramatic performances and readings lead to
discussions regarding race, power, and politics. It’s as if church slips into Sunday supper at
Theaster’s house. These elements create the framework for participants to become present to one
another. “Over the years,” Gates offers, “I've become really sensitive to who's coming to dinner
and why they're coming. My hope is that these different folk who meet each other could be
friends. And friendship builds a radical encounter. I understood from an early age that dinner
could do work besides feeding people.” Gates also desires to highlight another presence through
this meal. But it is perhaps not the one that Christians immediately think of. Everything about
Soul Food Pavilion points to black presence, from the performers, down to the recycled floorboards etched with the history of migrant workers’ life patterns, to the served soul food carrying its complex social-historic and cultural import.

Soul Food Pavilion Ritual

One way Gates directs such consideration is through ritual. “Ritual,” according to Gates, “becomes this tool that allows for people to feel safe. They give us all an excuse to be more open, more transparent, more vulnerable.” Jeffrey Dietch terms this dimension of Gates’ work as developing “advanced aesthetic social concepts” that get worked “directly in society, in the culture, in neighborhoods.” This explains Gates’ interest in the social and quotidian acts that are components in the works of Joseph Beuys and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among others. Gates’ use of ritual, however, must be seen in light of his study of African religions and his own history in the African American church (by age 13, he was the choir director at New Cedar Missionary Baptist Church). Indeed, much of his work, and articulations concerning it, carry religious inflections. For Gates, ritual primes participants through experiential means, thus enabling transcendence, a movement beyond the self. The environment, the food, the wine, and the music prepare partakers to gratefully receive and respond to elements of black life. These aesthetic tools of ritual, which mediate the exchange between differing folk, also impact the situation. The result for Gates is that participants “value the utensils of that experience and they value the people that they meet.” Discussion, although essential, is not the end, but one of the means towards relationships, as ritual further enlivens the desire for such interaction. Thus, at Gates’ table, justice is enacted as it moves beyond remote ideas of tolerance and ushers people directly into the lives of others through the poetic.
Justice and South Side Transformation

A community’s meal tradition indicates its values, while it also shapes social structures. Food can also point to the power arrangements behind its distributional configurations. Gates understands such social complexity behind a meal, and thus looks to highlight the circumstances surrounding the specifics of soul food. By doing so, he not only sheds light onto the continuing socio-economic marginalization of African Americans, he also looks to transform the cuisine, ennobling it by showcasing its artful economy. As art, Gates’ table offers a multi-level critique on the social dimensions surrounding food, one that Christians might take note of, namely recognizing who is empowered to feed.

Gates’ dinners are part of FEAST, Smart Museum of Art’s series of artist-engaged meals inspired to formulate hospitality amid a fast-paced society. The dinners provide encounters with the aesthetic in order to widen perceptions concerning social-artistic practice. As an artist, Theaster Gates embraces his varied interests that include ceramics, urban planning, performances, entrepreneurship, and installation art in order to create a social situation like Soul Food Pavilion. This affair takes place within his largest work to date, the Dorchester Project. This is nothing less than the rehabilitation of his Grand Crossings neighborhood. The dinner table previously described is set in a house that was formerly abandoned. Gates purchased it, gutted it, and reclaimed the materials to create his art objects. He reinvests the earnings from the sale of artworks to further purchase and develop abandoned homes and lots in the area. He calls this a “circular ecological system” that also happens to be economical. Ben Austen writing for the New York Times terms Gates’ renewal program as “urban interventions.” Gates’ aim is for viewers to reconsider black space in hopes to transform it.
To summarize, Gates’ table fellowship engenders cultural presence in a neighborhood that has been neglected. It seeks justice as it invites a diverse set of people to sit together. It utilizes ritual to validate what has been marginalized, and it looks to the transformation of a specific place and its people. These aspects of presence, ritual, justice, and transformation are also dimensions of the Christian table, both within and apart from the Eucharist. It is because Christian meals are so formational that their patterns can be consequently perceived in Gates’ table actions. His art dictum “love + labor = validation” corresponds to Christ’s own actions in and for the world. Such affinities lead me to view Gates’ work as paradigmatic for Christian creative activities in the world. Both Gates’ dinners and Christian meals do more than just feed people. In light of the themes of justice and transformation seen in Gates’ socially conscious table in Grand Crossing, I now turn to examples of table fellowship found in the New Testament in order to connect these two worlds.

Table Fellowship in the Scriptures

The Scriptures offer many meal passages that reflect Jesus’ radical hospitality: he comments on rigid social barriers, he accepts and feeds the multitudes, and he eats with sinners. To cover issues regarding table participation, I will narrow this list to the banquet narratives found in Luke 14 and Paul’s care of the table in 1 Corinthians 11. This will further lead into issues of diversity surrounding ritualistic aspects of early Christian meals.

Luke 14

In The Social Rhetoric of Luke 14, Willi Braun examines the socio-economic stratification of the Greco-Roman world evident through the banquet meal and how Jesus enters
into this system to subvert it. Before addressing the narrative, a quick review of the banquet tradition is due. Both Soul Food Pavilion and many early Christian meals exhibit the structure of this ancient meal practice. The banquet was a social platform that consisted of two parts, an eating portion followed by the symposium. The symposium provided space for an exchange of ideas regarding such philosophical issues as friendship or honor. Throughout the symposium, wine libations were enacted reminding the contemporary world how this event held a sacred dimension as diners imagined themselves at the table of the gods.

According to Dennis Smith, the banquet also perpetuated social codes and thus represented “a confirmation and ritualization of the boundaries” concerning social standings.\(^{10}\) Such ranking could be detected through the physical positions of participants at the table as well as seating placement. Only free citizens could recline. Women, slaves, and children were altogether excluded.

Luke 14 offers two parables that subvert the social dynamics of the banquet. In the passage, Jesus first encounters a man with dropsy. Dropsy, according to Braun, signifies insatiable desire—the illness consisted of hydro-retention accompanied with insatiable thirst.\(^{11}\) Hence, avarice and marginalization become twin themes of the narrative. Once the man is cured, Jesus takes notice of the acquisitiveness of guests trying to possess seats in this stratified world of dining. This incites the telling of Jesus’ first banquet parable in which participants, in humility, should refrain from taking the seat of honor. The core of his message is that honor is to be given, not taken. By way of the narrative, Jesus offers the host of the banquet an alternative invitation list—those that can’t reciprocate the invite with social or materialistic advantages. Jesus moves on to relate another banquet parable that further brings to the forefront the marginal, undervalued, and poor.
Like Gates, Luke is concern with who gets to sit at the table. Thus, a review of the second parable’s dinner invitations is important. The first goes to the urban elite. All are busy tending their new economic acquisitions: land, cattle, and the dowry that comes with a wife. The second invitation goes to the urban destitute, probably the lame and sick who cannot leverage their status through work or social relations. The third invite is extended to those outside the city. Braun interprets this as the rural poor or outsiders in general. The table, then, will seat the sick, poor, and the alien. Yet, like the healing of the man with dropsy, Luke also cares to show gospel transformation, this time of the host. This party-giver could have easily turned the banquet into a charity soup kitchen. Instead, Braun notes that by choosing the role of host, this man initiates a new kind of table fellowship, one that is inclusive and challenges the social games of the upwardly mobile. This host enacts the kingdom’s radical table hospitality.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Paul’s letter also points to the revolutionary fellowship initiated by Jesus, whereby a diverse gathering of people could now sit and dine at the same table. However, Paul observes that this hospitality was not being honored in Corinth. At the table, the rich ate their fill while others remained hungry. At this table, differences should not turn into divisions predicated on societal stratifications. Thus, Paul asserts this could not be the Lord’s supper!

After all, the bread and cup of the Corinthian table points to Christ. When these food elements are shared, they proclaim both the Lord’s death and the unfolding of his kingdom until total fulfillment. Between these two temporal markers, believers constitute a new people. Unlike the Greco-Roman banquet event that conferred and confirmed a place in a social stratum, Christians are to enact the eschatological significance of unity through diversity at Christ’s table.
where space is also reserved for the broken and the sinner.\textsuperscript{14} Just as Gates serves modest cuisine to the elite, and the host in the Lucan parable dines with outsiders, Paul chides the Corinthian privileged and asks them to hold back and set a just table.

**Christian Meal Diversity**

The subject thus far has focused on the diversity of those gathering at the table. Liturgical theologians Paul Bradshaw and Andrew McGowan also note the diversity surrounding the elements of early Christian communal meals. They relate how early liturgical traditions assumed that Eucharistic rites proceeded from a single archetype. Thus, a universalizing pattern perpetuated hegemonic tendencies, as certain scholars tried to shape or omit ancient texts in hopes of achieving such standardization. For Bradshaw and McGowan, such scholarship cannot resolve the many diverse Eucharistic examples evidenced in such texts as the *Didache*, or the baptism meals consisting of milk and honey related by Clement, or the variety of food elements found in many Eucharistic texts that excluded wine or included fruit, cheese, or fish. Their concern with the marginalization of such texts is parallel to Gates’ unease regarding African American culture and how it has been sidelined or ignored altogether.

By looking at more ascetic renditions of Eucharistic fare, Andrew McGowan points to possible socio-political contexts behind food distribution, thereby relating possible meanings of the meal for its participants. I have broken these values into three areas: particularity, poverty, and power. Ascetic meal practices, meaning bread only, or bread and water, could have served to make religious groups particular from their larger cultural and political context. Some communities could have also shared Paul’s concern for the conditions of poverty. Thus, they may have established minimal meals to include those of humble means for whom bread sufficed
as a meal. The connection between food and power turns meals into a form of symbolic action in reaction to social systems. Thus an ascetic Eucharist provided a social alternative to extravagant banquets. McGowan notes that to control food, whether it is through distribution or moderation, is the ability to control “forms of life as well.” Diverse Eucharistic practices, the varied elements that composed this meal, and the mixing of gender, race, and social stratification at the table point to how a meal, according to McGowan, “creates, expresses, and reaffirms sociability in various ways.”

Jesus thus takes the social rituals of his day and turns them upside down to establish kingdom practices, one of which is hospitality. Through simple elements like bread, fish, wine, and water he does more than just feed people. Shaped by such a meaningful tradition of meals, Christians as hosts are also empowered to do more than just feed people. In a time when church attendance is shifting, a table hosted by believers provides an alternative space for those who “don’t do church.” This table does not replace the Lord’s Supper, but it is profoundly shaped by it. Just as the connection between Gates’ Soul Food Pavilion and early Christian meals show concern for setting a place at the table, Christian practices, in like manner, should also value people, places, and things.

Presence, ritual, justice, and transcendence are the overlapping dimensions shared by Gates’ table and the Eucharist. These elements grow in relevance as Christians consider life in the body and the feeding of that body. I will end by reflecting on these embodied dimensions that enable participants to enter into life together.
Presence

“Is it possible to stay in a place,” asks Theaster Gates, “and demonstrate a transformation in the quality of life by simply being artful in that place?” For Gates, dinner is one way that brings about commitment to a place and its people. His own rootedness to Grand Crossings results in cultural presence, and thereby beauty moves into the neighborhood. Gates acknowledges that his fame enables him to live anywhere he desires, but by staying in Grand Crossings, Gates practices Jesus’ redemptive movement: moving into the specificity of place in order to transform it.

While Gates provides a cultural presence through a meal, the journalist Sara Miles likewise supplies food for a different sort of communion in her neighborhood. In *Take This Bread* she recounts her faith story through her experiences at the Eucharistic table at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. She writes how this community held great faith in the ritual of the open table to transform participants’ lives. This is exactly what happened when she accepted the invitation to partake. All of Miles’ meals prior and after began to resonate with deep and significant meaning. Being fed by Christ further prompted her to organize a food pantry at St. Gregory. For her, the program became communion with groceries. Thus, for both Gates and Miles, feeding invokes presence in the particularity of place.

Justice

The philosopher Simone Weil believes that God’s “implicit love” can be found and felt through neighbors, religious rituals, and beauty. These mediums draw us to the love of God, thus for Weil they hold a sacramental quality that leads to just actions. When people like Gates and Miles feed their neighbors, they become the bearer of Christ who enters the famished with the
bread that is given. This becomes an act of justice, a relational act. According to Weil, justice also entails creativity. Creative attention is needed to apprehend what is missing while imagination seeks to fill the gap. For Weil “love sees the invisible.” Theologian Gail Ramshaw notes how through rituals like prayer and feasting, the ‘I’ is extended to allow for the other, this includes even the unbaptized, animals, and trees. She reminds us that even Jesus became the other. In this way, beauty, neighbors, and the rituals of Christian liturgies offer participants a means to live beyond the self.

R ritual

Gates’ Soul Food Pavilion demonstrates how ritual provides the ground for communal cohesion. This public dimension of shared ritual has an important place in the religious history in the West that cannot be fully suppressed by secularization. Sociologist David Martin relates how depending on a nation’s history and its past religious practices, elements of religious rituals can still be publically evidenced. He shares how Finland’s Lutheran roots, heavily tied to a musical heritage, are further expressed through the country’s contemporary music festivals. Here, tourists engage the religiously infused work of composers like Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, and Henryk Górecki. Martin relates how the communal, family, and public networks sustain religious rituals over space and time. Raimundo Panikkar cites how such rituals hold sway despite lack of belief. Hence, “the thrust of symbolic actions [is] so powerful” that they are capable of “conveying their message to future generations.” This reinforces the idea that it is not just texts and doctrines that carry core beliefs of Christianity, but communal gestures also provide a witness to what God cares about. Clearly the values of liturgical communities are etched onto bodies, places, and things through ritual. In the case of Gates, church and Sunday suppers—the
essential rituals of his black church past—inform his art in such a way that he can’t help but employ a social dimension to his work.

Transformation

Similarly to Simone Weil, Regis Duffy argues that through symbols, ritual, and sacraments, God breaks into our world. Through such means, profound needs are revealed that further rouse examination towards change. These experienced transactions communicate in a way that is beyond mere the giving and receiving of data.

Jeffrey Vanderwilt notes how the Holy Spirit, God’s presence, cultivates “the pre-conditions of communion.” Can Christians be agents in such pre-conditioning? Can the artful practices of believers prime others for eventual communion with God? A Wesleyan perspective is helpful here. Mark Stamm points out how for Methodists the table is seen as a “converting sacrament,” a means of grace that progressively unfolds God’s will for the participant. In this way, the experience of the table and other liturgical gestures is supra-reflective in that it is belief revealed through actions. These actions operate pre-reflectively and accrue significance retrospectively. Who knows, then, with what purpose the Spirit is working when persons offer hospitality through creative endeavors? In this way, art, like faith, necessitates belief. Gates notes how “art isn’t the word that I lead with,” as he re-imagines the beauty of Grand Crossings. “I think maybe belief is the word that I lead with. I believe in places, I believe in people, I believe in the value of material things.” For this artist, creating is an expression of his belief. Thus, I end with this question formulated by Sara Miles: “Now that you’ve taken the bread, what are you going to do?”
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1 Alexander Schmemann, *For The Light Of The World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1963), 29-30. Schmemann speaks of the passion that begets liturgical dimensions of beauty that include vestments, poetic songs, and fragrant scents. When Christ is expected, believers should set out beautiful things.


10 Dennis Edwin Smith, *From the Symposium to Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2003), 110.


12 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 91.

13 Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric*, 131.


19 Sara Miles, Take This Bread (NY: Ballatine Books, 2007), 104.


27 Mark Stamm, Let Every Soul Be Jesus’ Guest: Theology of The Open Table (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 10-12.


29 Miles, Take This Bread, 97.