## Give us this day our daily bread

# CHAPTER FOUR

## **Feeding Ourselves**

### NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

The focus in this session is on remembering and forgetting. We all have selective memories. That fact is obvious in family disputes and court proceedings, where people give different accounts of the same events in their common past. Each of us constructs a unique history by a careful selection of remembrances.

In his Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Denial of Death*, anthropologist Ernest Becker dealt with a similar theme. He showed how we repress the knowledge that we are mortal: "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man."

The Deuteronomist had observed some selective denying in Israel. The terrible days of privation in the wilderness had been forgotten. So also had Yahweh's outright gift of the land. Pride had replaced thankfulness. People had begun to look to other gods for favors, like spouses who forget their first love and look to other lovers. Deuteronomy 8 attempts to force a remembrance by Israel of its dependence on Yahweh. The call to remember is coupled with a paradoxical warning: those who forget their dependence will surely perish.

One of the events that the Deuteronomist remembers is the feeding of Israel with manna in the wilderness. Jesus' feeding of the four thousand is reminiscent of that earlier feeding. And the narrative in Mark 8 also presents us with a paradox. The Gospel miracles seem to be events in which universal laws are suspended. But in fact, the miracles are revelatory of universal truth. Jesus' resurrection is assurance that God grants eternal life. The healing of the sick is assurance that illness is not a punishment. And the feeding of the four thousand is testimony that it is God who feeds us. We do not feed

ourselves. Like the sermon in Deuteronomy 8, this feeding is a reminder of what most of us would desperately like to forget: We are not immortal. We cannot secure our own lives. We cannot even feed ourselves.

Because it deals with themes of dependence, mortality, and forgetfulness, this session on the fourth petition will not be easy on the leader or the participants. It can be saved from hand-wringing by the remembrance of the three petitions already considered. The One to whom we look for food is the Holy One of Israel, whose purpose is justice and mercy, whose sovereign will prevails over all enemies, even death.

### **SESSION PLANS**

## Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

- 1. Indicate how Deuteronomy 8 and Mark 8:1-10 remind us that we cannot feed ourselves.
- 2. Describe their understanding of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer.

## Resources You May Need

Newsprint and markers or a chalkboard and chalk Directions for analyzing Deuteronomy 8 and Mark 8 in small groups A hymnbook

## Leadership Strategy

#### SETTING THE STAGE

- 1. Open the session with a prayer. Then follow the pattern you have already established for eliciting reactions to the reading assignment, identifying questions that need to be answered, and summarizing progress to this point in the study.
- 2. Write on newsprint or a chalkboard in separate columns the two tiers of petitions from the Lord's Prayer, e.g., "Hallowed be your name" at the top of one list, and "Give us this day our daily bread" at the top of the other. Remind participants what was said in the Introduction of the *Resource Book* about the difference between the first and second sections in the Lord's Prayer. The first section deals

with what God expects of us. The second section deals with what we may expect from God.

Suggest that we ought to pray the initial three petitions with our hand raised in a salute, but the next three with our hand held out to receive gifts. Perhaps lead the group in praying the Lord's Prayer in that manner. Point out the somewhat paradoxical nature of these two gestures—that in the same brief prayer we both promise loyalty and ask for help.

#### and/or

If participants were asked to collect articles about hunger at the close of the last session, have them share these now. They might also indicate how they or others in the community are involved in addressing this issue.

#### EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. The following activity can be done by the whole group or in two or three smaller groups. If you use small groups, provide a copy of the directions and newsprint and markers for each group. These groups should report the results of their work to the whole group after about fifteen minutes.

Ask the participants to open their Bibles to Deuteronomy 8. Write on newsprint the heading "God Sustains Human Life." Suggest this as the title for a sermon based on Deuteronomy 8. Invite everyone to read through the chapter and note ways God is reported to have sustained the people of Israel. Record these on newsprint or a chalkboard.

Suggest that a sermon usually contains at least three major points. Have the group select the items from the newsprint it wants to include in its sermon and discuss how these points might be interpreted to a present-day congregation.

Then ask participants to look for one summarizing verse which could furnish the text for the sermon. If no suggestions are forthcoming, offer as possibilities "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3b) or, "If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish." (v. 19) Invite persons to indicate why they prefer one or the other text as the focus for the sermon.

Ask participants to go through Deuteronomy 8 and underline every reference to remembering and forgetting. Then invite them to assist you in listing on newsprint or a chalkboard what Israel is admonished to remember and not to forget. Then ask which of these items Christians need to be reminded of today. What words or phrases would you use to translate these admonitions into the contemporary situation?

- 2. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the story of the feeding of the four thousand in Mark 8:1-10. Work on ideas for a sermon from this chapter also, either in the whole group or in the smaller groups used above. Use the following questions for this task:
  - a. If you were asked to preach a sermon on this story, what would you emphasize? (List the responses on newsprint.)
  - b. What parts of the story would you leave out? Why?
  - c. Would you tie this story to Deuteronomy 8? In what way?
  - d. What is the central message you would want to convey in the sermon?
  - e. How might the sermon link up with the articles about hunger reported in Setting the Stage?

#### and/or

Summarize on newsprint or a chalkboard the following ways in which Mark 8:1-10 might be understood in the life of the church:

- It may be used to show the concern of God for the hungry.
- It may be seen as a reminder of the feeding of the faithful in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.
- It may be employed as an illustration of the power of prayer.

Invite participants to suggest additional interpretations. Then ask them to select the choices they prefer and indicate why.

3. Part of the meaning of the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread" is the basic fact of our existence: We cannot feed ourselves.

Ask members of the group to imagine persons in quite different circumstances praying the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. As you mention these different

persons, ask participants to consider how each of these persons might understand this basic fact. Invite volunteers to share their responses with the group.

- An Ethiopian farmer whose children are dying in time of famine
- An overweight man sitting in a pew in a church in suburban Toronto
- A single parent on welfare in Oakland, anxious about unpaid bills
- A woman with a Ph.D. in agronomy, doing her daily devotions
- A ten-year old child saying her prayers before going to sleep
- A Senator or other public official attending church on Sunday

After the exercise, ask participants to suggest feelings or experiences which might be common to all of these persons.

#### and/or

On pages 40-42 of the *Resource Book* Mr. Purdy says that when we come to the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer we would do well to imagine ourselves as soldiers on active duty who are requesting our daily rations.

Make a brief presentation to the group outlining other interpretations of this petition. (It is a call to return to a simple, unadorned style of life; it is a plea for relief from our anxiety about food, clothing, etc.) Compare these views with Mr. Purdy's understanding. In the process, explore how the various interpretations do or do not provide linkages to Deuteronomy 8 and Mark 8.

#### and

If you are using this study during Lent, remind participants that fasting during Lent is a practice some Christians continue to the present day. Ask the group: What might fasting help us to remember? What are the dangers of fasting? Why has the practice been abandoned by so many Christians?

If you have time, turn to the sample table grace included in item #3 of the Reflection section on page 44 of the Resource Book. Ask the question listed there about the appropriateness of this grace, in light of the discussion about daily bread.

#### CLOSING

1. If you have established the practice of suggesting a graphic image as preparation for praying the Lord's Prayer together, invite participants to assume the posture of prayer and paint this imaginary picture for them:

We have all been conscripted into a vast army. Our nation has been threatened by the forces of a terrible tyrant and we have prepared ourselves for war. We are all in uniform, whatever our rank. We have left behind spouses, children, jobs, parents, homes, communities. We all have dependents back home who need food and housing and medical care that we will not be on hand to provide.

Our own army is so huge that it requires enormous quantities of food and clothing for us and our fellow soldiers, as well as a mammoth supply system that is efficiently organized and run. We have a large medical corps, but it could be overwhelmed if the casualties are high. It is the eve of a decisive battle. Our chaplain leads us in praying the Lord's Prayer.

or

As a closing prayer, use the words of a hymn that is a setting for the Twenty-Third Psalm. Or, if you prefer, use a hymn such as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," or "Break Thou the Bread of Life."

## Looking Ahead

- 1. If you have established the practice of closing with a time of prayer in which you read an imaginary scenario, recruit a member of the group to prepare the description for the next session. Suggest that this person consider using a prison scene as provided in the *Resource Book*.
- 2. Invite each person to make a private list of the persons and institutions to whom money is owed and a list of those persons and institutions owing money to him or her. These lists are referred to in activity #2 in Setting the Stage.
- 3. In activity #1 under Exploring the Scripture it is suggested that a member of the group give a brief presentation on the Year of Jubilee. See the activity for details.
- 4. In activity #3 in the same section it is suggested that three persons give brief presentations about the advantages of using "trespasses," "debts," or "sins" in the Lord's Prayer. Again, see the description of the activity for additional information.