

Opening the Table

by [Sara Miles](#)

*“Oh God of abundance, you feed us every day
Rise in us now, make us into your bread
That we may share your love with a hungry world ...”*

— Collect from the food pantry service

I started St. Gregory’s Food Pantry—La Bodega de San Gregorio—in November 2000, two days before I was baptized, as a thanksgiving, an extension of the Eucharist that had converted me.

When I first walked into St. Gregory’s early one winter morning, I’d never been to church before—never heard a Gospel reading, never read a psalm, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I didn’t even know that people don’t generally dance in church.

I loved the singing, was uncomfortable in the silences, and fled the coffee hour quickly, before some weird Christian could try to chat me up. But I was just blown away by the Eucharist. I heard the deacon’s announcement—*Jesus welcomes everyone to his table, so we offer communion to everyone, and to everyone by name*—and burst into tears. I stood there crying, terrified at what was happening, but I was so hungry for that bread that I kept coming back. I became a regular. After a while—my guess is because in any community there’s a shortage of people foolish enough to get up and work at 6 A.M. regularly on Sundays—a priest invited me to serve as one of the people we call “deacons” at the early-morning mass. (Serving under an ordained deacon’s leadership, lay people share many of the deacon’s traditional liturgical duties at St Gregory’s: welcoming people into the service, setting the Table, announcing the Gospel, leading music and prayers, and helping distribute communion.) Those words began to enter me in another way, as I spoke them aloud week after week. *Jesus welcomes everyone to his table*, I’d say, and hand the body of Christ to the body of Christ.



Saint Gregory's Food Pantry, by David Elliot, 2001

It sounds way too pretentious to say I had a vision, but the fact is I kept seeing a picture, during that first year of service as a deacon. Basically, it looked like St. Gregory's on any Sunday—a great, humming, semichaotic blur of people moving together around the Table, under the icon of the Dancing Saints. It was communion. I understood it as a food pantry. Some of the vestry and staff and members raised utterly reasonable objections to my proposal that we open up the church to offer free groceries every week to all comers: How would we pay for it? How would we find volunteers? What about thefts, and damage to the building, and security, and storage, and mess, and how were we going to keep it all organized and screen out troublemakers and not be overwhelmed by a tidal wave of need? How did this fit with St. Gregory's mission?

I wrote to the vestry: “The elements of St. Gregory's mission that I'd guess connect most strongly with the idea of a food pantry have to do with the welcoming of strangers, the invitation to find Christ embodied in our neighbors, and the physicality of worship.

“Of course there are the teachings about feeding the poor, but mostly I'm thinking of the Gospel's repeated insistence that God's right here, and we do not have to fear: *‘Take heart! It's me! Don't be afraid!’*”

At 3:30 every Friday, we open the church doors for the pantry, and people walk in. When they enter, and we greet each other, it's the thing I've been waiting for all week: a meeting, a recognition, a joy. Paul described it to the Corinthians: “You are all the letter we need, a letter written on our heart; any man can see it for what it is, and read it for himself. It is plain that you are a letter that has come from

Christ for us to deliver: a letter written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, written not on stone tablets but on the pages of the human heart.”

Now, each week at La Bodega we serve over 250 families in the sanctuary, giving away more than three tons of groceries—rice, beans, fruit, vegetables, cereal, bread. We set up right around the Table, laying out bright altar cloths, putting up an icon at the door, piling the food high so that people can choose what they need. We have dozens of volunteers, some of them church members and many of them pantry clients—people who, like me, came to receive and stayed to help out. When it’s time to open, we vest ourselves in aprons, gather around the Table, sing prayers, kiss each other, eat something, and start to work. We offer food to everyone, without exception: the deaf, the crippled, the aged, the insane, the perfectly healthy, and the faithful; doubters, convicts, widows, foreigners, and whores. And we offer it to everyone by name.

About a year ago, our rector Donald motioned me into the vestry during the food pantry. “I want to put this in here,” he said, and opened up the huge official parish book that records all the services at St. Gregory’s. “Bodega,” he wrote, “Friday, 3:30.”

The pantry did not become a “service project” of the church. It’s simply church: a liturgy of acts, modeled directly on the liturgy of the Word. It’s as necessary and as intimate as breaking bread together: daily bread, the bread of Heaven, and the bread that we become. We are bringing each other into communion.

There’s a tendency to think of service as something auxiliary to “real” worship—something we do because, being edified and basically nice people, we want to be helpful to others. Or because, in that dreadful, condescending phrase, we feel an obligation to “those less fortunate than ourselves.” We tend to think of service as something a committee does. Something you write a check for. “A good cause.”

But the people who serve at the pantry, like those who serve in our liturgies, know otherwise.

When we sing our prayers together right before the pantry opens, holding hands, I often thank God for letting me feed others, as I have been fed, and for allowing me to give, knowing that at other times I have been, and will be, only able to receive.

I could just as easily pray in the words of another announcement the deacons make during Sunday worship: *“Now seeing how greatly God loves us, let us share freely in the good things we have received, so the whole world may know God’s love.”*

It’s easy to hear this as a delicate pitch, implying a payback, some kind of a deal. But the pantry has showed me that the important word is “freely.” We all come sinful and needy to the Table, so at the pantry we don’t ask for ID, or try to ferret out and stop cheaters. This, after all, is how God gives: not because we especially deserve it, not because we’ve been good, not because we’ve performed the rituals correctly—but freely, because of love. Finding and following that spirit, in which I can stop judging others, stop trying to

decide which poor people deserve my help, stop attempting to control the people I give to, is the thing that frees me.

The people who serve at the pantry are, like most of the deacons at St. Gregory's, lay ministers. Their work encompasses welcoming, organizing, feeding, teaching, anointing, listening, healing, hauling, singing, praying, and schlepping. They do everything: lift 50-pound bags of rice, light candles, bless children, break up fights, give a thirsty man a drink of water and a hungry woman a loaf of bread. They sort through pallets of lettuce and piles of potatoes. They tell strangers good news. They sweep the stairs and take out the garbage and touch those possessed by demons. They lead the people in prayer and in work. They keep the bathroom clean.

And over time, the food pantry has become a school for St. Gregory's deacons, as I've started to recruit people to serve in the liturgy from among the pantry volunteers. The Bodega and the Eucharist are, after all, different enactments of the same Gospel. It is the same invitation we sing, both on Fridays and on Sundays, when we gather God's people around the Table: "Draw near!"

It's easy to spot the likely deacons. They're not always the sweetest or the noblest ones. They're not Christians, like Peter, so busy with important holy business that they don't have time to wait on tables. They're not guilty or dutiful. Above all, they're not scared. They're the people who are having fun. They're outside swapping jokes; they're on the phone, dealing with a delivery crisis with gusto; they're in the sacristy, picking out the most beautiful altar cloth; they're making coffee for everyone and handing extra M&Ms to the kids. When I see someone like that—someone who can take care of business, who is equally willing to pick up garbage and to sit down and listen to anyone—I usually make an invitation. "Hey," I'll say. "Can you take a chalice this Sunday?"

Many of our best volunteers at the pantry have backgrounds in restaurant service—cooks, waiters, expeditors. Lawrence, a maitre d', began serving as a deacon in the liturgy after several months of volunteering at the pantry. Tall, gracious, unflappable, he deals with hundreds of hungry poor people, stressed-out priests, rich, cranky customers, and an unexpectedly large crowd of Sunday worshippers with the same ease. "It's all about, 'Your table is ready,'" he says.

Others started shy. "When I began volunteering at the pantry, I was pretty uncomfortable about having contact with poor people," says Todd, an engineer. "I was good at systems, not at people." But it wasn't long before I'd see Todd hanging out, listening to confidences and talking for hours. I asked him to think about serving as a deacon. Again he demurred. "I'm not a good enough person to stand up there in front of everyone," he said. "I'd have to be a whole lot more holy." I laughed. "The thing about serving," I told him, "is that it's not about you."

We had help last week from Tish, who picked up a huge grapefruit, amazed by all the beautiful produce we get—blushing red potatoes and curly spinach and organic oranges and ripe peaches—that grocers have discarded, and that instead of

being trash is feeding people. I pointed to the grapefruit. "That's the stone the builders rejected," I said. I can see how we're like that, too: the volunteers, and the families who come for groceries. Each of us, at some point in our lives, might have been rejected for being too young, too poor, too queer, too old, too crazy or difficult or sick; in one way or another not right. But gathered around the Table in this work we become right together; the cornerstone of something God is building.

Service is thanksgiving, because it means not only giving freely, but understanding how greatly we're loved. I remember an afternoon at the food pantry when I was trying to open up, while an impatient throng of people shouted at me and at each other in three languages. I'd been unloading crates of oranges as fast as I could, and bossing the volunteers around, but we were still behind schedule. We were short a crate of snacks, and the two old Cuban sisters who always show up hours early were out front, bickering noisily. Three hyper little kids were pestering me for candy, and the crazy guy with apocalyptic theories kept trying to corner me and explain the secret messages he'd received. Some visiting minister was standing around, but I couldn't get a minute to talk to him; new volunteers kept asking me what to do, but somehow nothing was getting done. Everything felt hectic and irritating and on the verge of chaos, and my feet hurt. I was sick of poor people, sick of church people, utterly sick of myself.

And then a woman pushed her way to the front of the crowd. She was Chinese, with a quilted jacket, and she was thrusting a package at me. I couldn't understand what she was trying to say, but she kept smiling and coming closer. "Here," she said, and handed me a piece of fish wrapped in waxed paper, still warm. "Food, for you."

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