

I was in first grade when I learned that religious faith would not be easy to sustain. I bowed my head to pray at lunch, just as my parents had taught me.

*Thank You, God, for our food,
for homes and health and all things good.
For the wind and the rain and the sun above,
And most of all for those we love.*

Then I said "Amen" and raised my head just as Jerry Porter hit me on the arm and called me a twinkie. This wasn't like home, where I was patted on the head and given an extra helping of macaroni and cheese. This was the World. This was what Pastor Taylor cautioned us about every Sunday morning at Harmony Friends Meeting.

"The World will persecute you for your faith. Jesus didn't have it easy. Neither will you. Don't forget it. There's hard times ahead. Be strong."

The next Sunday at church, I told my Sunday school teacher, Bea Majors, about Jerry Porter hitting me for praying. She told me it was the price of faith. If I had been a student of the Scriptures, I would have pointed out the biblical injunction against public prayer. Matthew 6:6. Printed in red ink, straight from the Lord's own mouth. "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray..." It would have saved me a lot of bruises.

Even though it was a dangerous half hour, I enjoyed school lunch most of all. I liked the order of it. Lining up in the classroom in front of the fish tank, marching down the hallway to the cafeteria, reaching down in the milk cooler and pulling out a chocolate milk. Sitting at a long table and talking until Mr. Michaels, the principal, put a classical music album on the record player which was the signal to stop talking and start eating. To this day, whenever I hear Beethoven, I think of Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, and diced peaches.

I especially liked the food trays. At our house, all the food ran together on our plates. The green bean juice got mixed in with the applesauce, which spilled over on the corn. I didn't care for that and wouldn't eat it. My mother told me to clean my plate, that kids in Africa didn't have any food. I offered to send them my supper.

What I liked about the school food was that it knew its place. There was the meat section of the tray. It was the biggest section of all, in the lower right-hand corner. Next to it was the vegetable section, which was a circle in the lower left corner. On the left edge of the tray was where you laid the silverware, along with your napkin and drinking straw. The fruit went in the upper left corner, and next to it, in the top center section, was the dessert. In the upper right corner was where you set your cardboard container of milk. Chocolate milk if you were a boy, white milk if you were a girl.

The trays were a disservice, leading us to believe the rest of life would be orderly, though it never was. They'd have been better off stirring our food together and telling us that was how the world was—mixed up and out of kilter. Instead, they had us walk in lines and didn't let our food run together. They taught us harmony and set us forth into chaos.

I had forgotten all about the trays until I went to eat lunch with my son, Levi, the second week of school. I signed in at the office and walked down the hallway toward his classroom. I passed the sixth-grade hallway and heard Miss Fishbeck calling out words for a spelling bee. I listened as Amanda Hodge spelled the word *methodical*. *M-e-t-h-o-d-i-c-a-l*. The talk at the Coffee Cup was that she might win the county spelling bee.

My son's class was lined up in the hallway. Mrs. Hester marched us to the cafeteria where the ladies spooned out our food in sections. We sat at a long table. It reminded me of a prison table, where the convicts ate and planned their escapes. I was sandwiched between Levi and a little boy named Adam Fleming.

My son had told me about Adam—how Adam's name was written on the chalkboard at least once a day, how he'd been sent to the principal's office two times already, how none of the kids liked him.

"He's a liar," my son reported. "And once at recess he kicked Billy Grant right in the stomach. On purpose. If he messes with me, I'll karate chop him."

The Flemings lived east of town in a trailer. Adam and his two little sisters and his parents had moved to town the year before. Adam's daddy, Wayne,

worked nights at the Kroger waxing floors, and his mother labored at the McDonald's down near the interstate.

Then early one morning Wayne Fleming came home from work to find the kids asleep and his wife gone. There was a note on the table which read, *Don't try to find me. I've gone away.*

The rumor was that she'd met a trucker and had gone west with him. Our thoughts toward her were not charitable. The women from the meeting had been taking food out to the trailer and the lady who worked at the Kroger deli let Wayne take home the day-old bread and the chicken wings that didn't sell. The nights were hardest, when Wayne would tuck the children into bed and they would cry for their mommy. People said they were better off, but it didn't feel that way to Adam and his sisters.

Their daddy never knew what to tell them, so he never said anything. He would just hold them until they fell asleep. Then he'd tidy up the trailer and start the laundry and wash the dishes. Then the retired neighbor lady would come sleep on the couch, and Wayne would leave for the Kroger.

I knew all this as I was kind of their pastor, since they'd come to our meeting the Easter before. I'd gone to visit them a time or two and had seen Wayne at Kroger, when I'd go there late at night for ice cream. We took to visiting in the aisles and struck up a kind of friendship. When his wife ran off with the trucker, Wayne called to tell me.

I mentioned their need to the Friendly Women's Circle who were casting about for a new project. They decided to take on the Flemings. But as magnificent as those women were, they were no replacement for a mother. Adam and his sisters still cried themselves to sleep.

I had told my son that Adam didn't have the blessings he had and to treat him nice.

Now Adam was sitting next to Levi and me in the school cafeteria. He said, "My daddy sleeps in the daytime. He doesn't eat lunch."

I said, "Hey, Adam, why don't I come next week and have lunch with you. Would you like that?"

He said he would. The he said, "My mommy came to eat with me yesterday. Have you met my mommy? She's a good mommy. She's real nice."

Hoping if he said it enough times, it'd make it true.

I said, "I don't know your mother well, but I bet she's nice."

He said, "She's real nice. When I get home from school she has cookies for me. And she buys me lots of toys. Anything I want."

A little girl across the table shrieked, "He's lying. He's a liar. His mommy's gone. She ran off."

"Shut your face," Adam screamed and lunged at her. I grabbed hold of him and pulled him back. He was shaking with rage. Then he leaned into me and began to cry.

The lunchroom monitor marched over, frowning, and told Adam if he didn't settle down, he's have to sit off by himself at the quiet table.

Raw pain alarms us. It reminds us that life isn't as orderly as we'd hoped. We demand that pain settle down before we shuffle it off to the quiet table. We want pain to stay in its own little section, want to keep it from spilling over into the other parts of life. Just like those lunch trays. Keep pain in its own little compartment.

I held Adam to me, thinking of his mother. Wondering if her joy in running off was worth all this. I thought of Wayne having to teach his children they were still worth loving and worth having. What a large task, when all the evidence seems otherwise.

This was the World Pastor Taylor had warned against. A world where some parents cared more about their happiness than they did their children. I thought of the cold evil committed by folks looking to be happy.

The World.

I held that little boy to me and thought hopeful thoughts of a New World. Yearning for it as never before. A New World.

A world where God has set up housekeeping, where God will live right with us, and we with Him. He'll wipe the tears from our eyes, and death will die. No more crying, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more.

I held that crying boy to me and thought my hopeful thoughts.