

Mark 8:1-9a
Feast Day of Daniel G.C. Wu

Who Feeds You?*

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I often go to Chinatown whenever I *really* need to be fed. It's not that I don't appreciate the Brattle Café or anything, but there are times when I just need food that feeds my soul.

Sometimes I have a craving for steamed soup dumplings – you know, the kind that you have to eat from a spoon because there is so much broth that comes out when you bite into the wrapper. Other times I want nothing more than a large bowl of wonton noodle soup with roast pork. Still other times – like this past weekend – I need my dim sum fix, and I'll go with my theological dim sum buddies, Gale Yee and Kwok Pui Lan, and Sze-kar Wan if he's in town. I'm getting hungry just talking about all this!

My trips to Chinatown, however, are not just about the food. Chinatown also feeds me on a deeper level. It's about being with my people – people who look like me, who are bilingual like me, and who share a similar cultural and historical background with me. As someone who grew up in a first-generation Chinese American immigrant household, Chinatown reminds me of my childhood home in the San Francisco Bay Area – sitting in my mother's and grandmother's kitchen, listening to Cantonese and Mandarin conversations with our family friends who were always called “uncles” and “aunties.”

Today we celebrate the feast day of Daniel Gee Ching Wu, the first Chinese American priest in the Episcopal Church. Like Jesus in today's Gospel reading about the feeding of the four thousand, Daniel Wu had a great “compassion” for thousands of Chinese American immigrants who traveled the “long distance” from China to the Golden Hills of San Francisco, and who hungered to be fed, both physically and spiritually.

For nearly four decades, Wu and his wife, King Yoak Won Wu, ran English and Chinese language schools (as well as sewing schools) that gave Chinese American immigrants the language and economic skills – not to mention the spiritual support – they needed in order to survive in the United States. To understand how important this ministry was, just imagine if you only heard today's gospel in Cantonese without the English translation. How lost would you be?

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Daniel Wu was born in 1883 in China. His birth name was Ng Gee Ching, and he moved to Hawaii as a child. (He subsequently changed his surname to “Wu” so that it could be pronounced more easily by Americans who were not of Chinese descent). As a young man in Hawaii, Wu met an Episcopal Deaconess, Emma Drant, and he became her instructor in Chinese. Although Wu initially resisted the Christian faith, he eventually converted to Christianity and took the baptismal name of Daniel.

In 1905, Deaconess Drant moved to California, where she established two Chinese American Episcopal missions in San Francisco and Oakland. Those congregations still exist today as True Sunshine Church and Our Savior Church, and they remain leading parishes in the Episcopal Church for Chinese American ministries.

Deaconess Drant needed help, and in 1907 she convinced Wu to move to California. He began teaching at those missions just three days after his arrival in the San Francisco Bay Area. Wu became a seminarian at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in 1908, and he graduated with honors in 1912. He was ordained a priest in 1913, and became the priest-in-charge of those missions for thirty-one more years until his retirement in 1944.

In 1913, *The Living Church* magazine reported on the significance of Wu’s ordination. It wrote: “On the morning of the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, in the chapel of the San Francisco mission for Chinese, the newly ordained priest in charge celebrated his first Eucharist. It was, perhaps, the first time a Chinese priest had offered the Holy Mysteries in the Chinese language on the Pacific Coast. On the next Sunday the communicants of the Oakland mission . . . [received] the Holy Communion from their own priest.”

Ministry to the Chinese American immigrant community was hard work in light of the racism and anti-Asian sentiments of the early twentieth century. Listen to this incredibly problematic passage from an official Episcopal Church publication from 1937: “In the cities, the Orientals are almost invariably compelled to live by themselves in the worst section, constantly surrounded by evil influences. . . . It is a wonder that so many do keep clean physically and morally.” The publication described San Francisco Chinatown as having “curling eaves [and] narrow streets, gay at one end, odoriferous at the other where silks and jade give way to unusual edibles.”

Despite these challenges, Wu and his wife ministered tirelessly to make sure their congregations were fed. In a 1939 letter to his bishop (a copy of which I received from one of Wu’s grandchildren), Wu asked for a \$5 monthly raise for his night school teachers, who were only making \$15 a month. Wu noted the critical importance of his missions’ teaching ministries: “Most of our night school students are young men who have absolutely no chance of enrolling in the ordinary American common schools.”

Daniel Wu’s ministerial impact, however, was not limited to the people who he fed both economically and spiritually during his lifetime. As someone who is currently in the ordination process in the Episcopal Church, I am also fed deeply by Wu’s ministry.

You might think that discernment and formation is not a big deal for someone like me who has completed over a dozen years of graduate theological education, who has over a decade of ordained ministry experience under his belt, and who serves on the faculty of an Episcopal seminary.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Like many of you, I have experienced great highs and lows from being in the process, including moments of frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt. Some days are wonderfully affirming of my call. Other days, I've woken up wondering why in the world I ever voluntarily subjected myself to this. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

Today's Gospel reading actually speaks to this issue. Jesus tells his disciples that the crowds must be fed because otherwise they will "faint" on their way back home. Although the NRSV uses the word "faint" to translate the Greek word *ekluthēsontai*, that word actually has more than just the physical meaning of fainting. It can also be translated metaphorically as "giving out" – that is, losing one's heart or courage.

It is in this metaphorical sense that Daniel Wu feeds me. The photo on the cover of our service bulletin is taken from the October 24, 1949, issue of *Life Magazine*, which reported on the General Convention that took place that year in San Francisco. (This was the infamous General Convention that refused, on a vote of 321 to 242, to seat three duly elected women deputies on the grounds that only "laymen" – literally "lay men" – could speak or vote. That General Convention also instituted psych exams for postulants.) On a more positive note, many of the 1949 General Convention deputies and bishops visited the Oakland mission to pay tribute to Wu for his many years of ministry.

For me, seeing that photograph of Wu – that is, someone who looks like me (and my father and my grandfather) and who is surrounded by a younger generation of Chinese American ministers – has given me heart and courage. Reading about the obstacles that Wu and his wife overcame in their nearly four decades of ministry together gives me strength to keep moving forward. Wu's ministry feeds me deeply, in the same way that going to Chinatown feeds me deeply, and in the same way that Sze-kar Wan's scholarly and priestly ministry feeds me deeply.

So who feeds you in your own vocational journey, whether lay or ordained? Who, like Jesus, has shown compassion to you in your spiritual hunger? Who keeps you from "fainting," or from losing heart or courage? And who do *you* feed in your own ministries?

Let us give thanks today for the ministries of Daniel Gee Ching Wu and King Yoak Won Wu, and for the ways in which they have fed – and continue to feed – thousands upon thousands of Chinese Americans in the Episcopal Church.

+Amen.