

Out of Nothing
John 6: 5-15
February 4, 2024
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I can't count the number of times that I've gone to my refrigerator, scanned the shelves, always full to bursting, and thought to myself, "ugh, we have nothing to eat." Though I'm intimately aware that a well-stocked kitchen and an abundance of dinner options is a tremendous privilege in a world where so many don't have enough, I often find myself paralyzed by such plenty.

In these moments, the relentlessness of providing three meals a day, every day, for a growing family overwhelms any sense of gratitude that I might feel for all that we have. It's a massive undertaking to remember everyone's preferences, plan our meals, keep inventory of what we have on hand, shop for groceries, prepare the food, and clean up afterward. I'm sure I'm not the only one who inwardly groans when someone asks "what's for dinner?"

Sometimes I wish I had the same enthusiasm for feeding people that Jesus did. Over and over again, we see him connecting with people over shared meals, delighting in the act of nourishing and sustaining others. He ate with sinners and uninvited guests, he feasted with friends and enemies alike. The night before he was put to death, he told his disciples to remember him every time they eat this bread and take this cup. And just when we thought that was the end, our risen Lord broke bread with them as they journeyed to Emmaus and roasted fish to share over a campfire. "I am the bread of life" he tells us. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

There's just something about feeding people that gets right to the heart of who Jesus is. Stopping to eat isn't a distraction from the work of teaching and healing. It isn't just another monotonous task on the to-do list. It *is* the work. Sharing a meal can be holy.

If you ask me, there's no story that captures this better than the feeding of the 5,000. The story begins atop a mountain, where Jesus liked to go to get away from the crowds, but even there he managed to draw a following, and soon a whole assembly was gathered. They had seen the signs and wonders he'd performed, how he'd healed the sick and turned water into wine, and they just had to see and hear more.

When the disciples saw all of the people coming, they panicked. Here they were in the middle of nowhere, folks gathered expectantly with empty bellies and many different needs. There was no way they could meet all of the demand. With no grocery store in sight, no Grub Hub or Uber Eats, no pizza place willing to deliver our that far, they were really in a bind.

But the problem didn't end there. "Where are we going to come up with enough money to feed all these people?" Philip asked. "Even six months' wages wouldn't be enough to give everyone a small snack!" Then Andrew mentioned that a little boy had brought five loaves and two fish along with him, but surely that wouldn't even put a dent in the need.

I think it's important to note, here, that the disciples' response was entirely focused on problem-solving. No one questioned whether the people gathered around were deserving of a meal. No one blamed them for not being responsible enough to pack their own food. No one worried that people would take advantage of the system. No one insisted that "there's no such

thing as a free lunch” or suggested that the people gathered “pull themselves up by the bootstraps.” No one disparaged the crowd for “asking for a handout.” The disciples were more interested in serving the people than judging their worthiness. When I read their responses, I hear genuine concern for others rather than condemnation or frustration.

Though they’re fearful and worried that there isn’t enough to go around, they know that setting up eligibility criteria isn’t part of Jesus’ vision for the beloved community. They’ve walked with Jesus long enough to know that the economy of grace is much more all-encompassing. Surely, Jesus will know what to do.

Indeed, he tells everyone gathered to sit down together, and he takes the loaves and the fish, gives thanks to God for the generous offering, and as he distributed the provisions among the crowd, somehow all were fed. And even after everyone had eaten their fill, as much as they wanted, there were still twelve whole baskets more! “Save those leftovers,” Jesus told them. “None of these good gifts should go to waste. Not only is there enough for everyone – there’s plenty.”

Jesus offers all those who come to him an abundance. He gives us more than even seems possible, and his ministry knows no bounds. He turns our nothings into somethings. He works with what we have, even when it feels like it’s not enough. He takes the odds and ends – the type of stuff in the back of the refrigerator – and prepares a lavish feast. And suddenly, the mundane becomes holy. The drudgery of the kitchen becomes the work of the kingdom. A little boy opens his lunchbox and reveals something about the nature of God. Can you imagine?

In her book *Take This Bread*, Episcopalian author Sara Miles writes that “there’s a hunger beyond food that’s expressed in food, and that’s why feeding is always kind of a miracle.” While I can’t say that every meal I prepare feels quite that divinely-inspired, I’ve certainly felt God’s presence around a common table, and I bet you have, too.

Sometimes grace meets us in the lasagna fresh out of a neighbor’s oven when we’re caught up in a whirlwind of grief. Or mercy finds us in a corner booth, catching up with an old friend over lunch, when we were feeling lonely and homesick. Maybe laughter erupts at the barbeque as burgers flip and kids dart every which way and stories connect us with each other. Perhaps peace descends when the baby gazes up at us, nursing ‘til he’s good and full. In these moments, God is abundantly present. In these meals, we taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

But you don’t have to take my word for it! In a few moments, we’ll all gather around a table and tell a family story. One that’s been shared so many times many of us know it by heart. We’ll dust off the recipe that’s been handed down from generation to generation – nothing fancy – but I guarantee it’ll taste like home. Sure, it might not look like much. A bit of bread. A spot of juice. But somehow, there will be plenty to go around, and no one will leave hungry. Come and see for yourself. Amen.

- Emily Rhodes Hunter, 2023