



“Leftovers”

Scripture – Matthew 14:13-21

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, August 2, 2020

“Normally we would have 120 people lined up for the food pantry,” said Andrew Schweibert, the Transitional Pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian in Los Angeles.¹ Typically, this congregation provides groceries for about 120 households each week through its direct food service program. That’s under *normal* circumstances. But, on the first Saturday of the pandemic, 180 people were lined up outside their doors. The next week, there were 300. Then, 400. “Every week there would be more people who were hit hard by this pandemic and who were in need,” Pastor Schweibert explained.

Since the Coronavirus hit California, Immanuel Church’s ministry has grown from providing food one day a week to distributing bags of groceries *six* days a week. They now serve about 1,700 people on a weekly basis, many of whom were gainfully employed only a few months ago.

I imagine these numbers don’t surprise you, discouraging as they are. We know the havoc this pandemic has let loose on the world; leaving the comfortable vulnerable, and the vulnerable destitute. The need is great — in Los Angeles, in Dallas, in Wilmington.

Given the times, it would not require much imagination to picture the faces of our friends in Guatemala, or guests at Emmanuel Dining Room, or neighbors who have lost jobs, or — even — ourselves among the crowd Matthew describes. The crowd that is clamoring for healing and for the hope that comes with it. The crowd that receives Christ’s compassion as soon as he steps out of the boat.

“When [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd,” Matthew tells us. “And [Jesus] had compassion for them and cured their sick.” The sympathy he feels for the strangers standing before him compels Jesus to act. So, instead of retreating up the mountainside as planned, Jesus spends his afternoon healing person after person after person.

Eventually the disciples step in: *Lord, it’s getting late. Send these people away so that they may go and buy food.*

Now, I don’t think the disciples are hard-hearted. They’re not indifferent to the needs of the crowd. They’re just being pragmatic. They can hear empty bellies starting to rumble; they can see children tugging on their parents’ robes: “Mommy, Daddy, I’m hungry.” And the disciples know that the five loaves and two fish they’ve brought with them are not going to cut it. No, the disciples are not indifferent to the people’s needs. They just lack the vision to imagine another way.

¹ Rich Copley, “This Church took out the pews to help feed L.A.’s hungry” (*Presbyterian News Service*, July 23, 2020), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/this-church-took-out-the-pews-to-help-feed-l-a-s-hungry/>

But Jesus — Jesus sees possibility where the disciples only see a problem. Jesus pictures something different. *You give these people something to eat*, he commands. Jesus asks the disciples to do what he has already done; he asks them to have compassion for the crowd. And he charges them to act: *You give them something to eat*.

We do not know when the miracle takes place. We only know that Jesus takes five loaves and two fish, blesses and breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to hand out. And, somehow — by God’s grace — those five loaves feed a multitude. Somehow, by God’s abundant grace, all who are gathered there eat and are filled.

In that moment, as Jesus draws the disciples into his work, the reign of God becomes manifest on the lakeshore. Right then and there, as the hungry eat and are filled, the Kingdom of Heaven becomes real ... No longer the subject of perplexing parables, but the stuff of broken bread and satisfied stomachs. Of grace that spills over — from hands that bless to hands that serve, to hands that receive. The substance of compassionate care that alleviates suffering, as a hurting and hungry multitude tastes and sees that the Lord is good.

In the end, all who are gathered there eat and are filled. Every person receives enough. Every person walks away satisfied ... But that’s not all. There is bread to spare. So abundant is this feast that there are broken pieces left over — 12 baskets full.

Twelve baskets. It’s a number that all four Evangelists agree on. And that’s saying something, because the particulars of Christ’s ministry vary a lot across the four Gospels. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John agree on this: after the “Feeding of the Five Thousand” there are twelve baskets of bread left over.

Why twelve?

Is it just a number to show the abundance of God’s grace? ... Perhaps.

Many suggest that the twelve baskets signify the twelve tribes of Israel — that these leftovers point to the promise that all God’s people will be fed and filled. And there is truth to this interpretation. Because God’s grace is not limited to those gathered on the lakeshore, but extends to people scattered far and wide. Those leftovers remind us that, in the Kingdom of Heaven, there is enough for the whole people of God.

But I like to imagine that there is more to the story. Immediately after the feeding of the multitude, Jesus orders the disciples to get into the boat and cross over to the other side, while he stays behind to pray. What if Jesus picked up those twelve baskets and handed one to each of his disciples as he stepped into the boat, so that they would have bread for the journey? What if that leftover bread is what sustained the Twelve as they navigated Galilee’s wind and waves? Maybe their supply of bread outlasted the voyage. What if the disciples carried those leftovers as they traveled with Jesus, reaching into their baskets every time they needed a snack to hold them over until the next time they could sit at table with their Lord.

I like to imagine that those leftovers nourished the Twelve as they watched Jesus teach and preach and heal. And that, every time they grabbed loaves of bread to take on the road, they remembered Jesus handing them the baskets of broken pieces. I like to imagine that, years later — after Jesus was gone, after he had commissioned them to continue his work — the disciples still thought back to that miracle whenever they packed bread for the journey. Perhaps, every time they set out to continue Christ’s ministry of compassion, they remembered how those leftovers — how that excess of grace — sustained them for the work at hand.

And, still, I think there’s more to this story. What if those twelve baskets of broken pieces are for us, too? What if those leftovers are there to remind us that God’s grace spills over still —sustaining a new generation of disciples to continue Christ’s ministry of compassion? Maybe those leftovers are there to remind us that — even when the

need is great — God’s grace is more than enough. And it will nourish us, and disciples scattered far and wide, as we work for a world in which all God’s people are fed and filled.

God’s abundant grace is sustaining our fellow disciples at Immanuel Presbyterian in Los Angeles, who are working tirelessly to continue Christ’s ministry of compassion and get bread into the hands of a hungry multitude. As the need in their community grows, so has this congregation’s need for food to distribute to their neighbors. Six days a week, volunteers pack shopping bags with groceries: a pound of chicken, cans of beans, fresh produce, milk.

And, at the end of the day, the shelves are often empty. They have no food left to offer. And then, miraculously, they get a phone call: a community partner has pallets of food they’d like to donate so that Immanuel Presbyterian can continue to serve its neighbors in need.

The Director of Operations says that she has seen this happen time and again since they decided to open their food pantry six days a week. Just when they are looking out upon the crowd, wondering how they are going to feed all these people, God provides in ways they could never have imagined. And, in that moment, it becomes clear that God sustains them on this journey. Even when the needs are great, these disciples are finding that God’s grace is more than enough. And, as that grace spills over — from hands that first blessed the loaves and fish to hands that continue to serve — the Kingdom of Heaven becomes real, right on the streets of Los Angeles.

Yes, friends — those twelve baskets of broken pieces are for us, too. They are for disciples in Los Angeles and disciples in Wilmington, for disciples far and wide who need bread for the journey. Those leftovers remind us that God’s grace spills over still — sustaining the church to continue Christ’s work, until all who hunger are fed and filled and God’s reign becomes manifest, here and now.

Prayers of the People ~ Patti Ridout

Please join me in prayer:

Loving God, we come to you this morning with gratitude for the opportunity to listen to and to be inspired by your Word. In this morning’s message, the disciples witness Jesus responding with compassion for the hungry in body and spirit. We too know that this is our calling. But, at times, we are like the 12...ready to send away the needy because the time is not convenient or because we believe we have given enough. With your grace, may we faithfully respond to others with a limitless capacity and desire for meeting their needs.

Lord, we pray for our children and grandchildren who are witnessing a world filled with accelerated and generational hatred making it difficult to break the chains of intolerance...the chains that separate us as humans and that separate us from you. May we as their church family, their parents, their grandparents, their teachers and all roles models, show our children a better way, by living in your Light.

God, may the power of your presence be known to those who are suffering from illness, grief, food insecurity, persecution and the many wounds in life that only you can sooth. We ask this, knowing that we are the channel for that reveal. And as we give and receive from each other in this way, may we be reminded that goodness flows through all your children, regardless of our differences.

We pray for the courage and wisdom to elect political leaders who seek “good trouble” in facilitating justice for all. And we give thanks for our leadership at Westminster where divisiveness is quelled by consensus-building, where care is unending and where kindness prevails.

Lord we await the day with hope when food is abundant for all, when justice is for all, when “Peace be with you“ can be said with a touch, when we see the sweet faces of our children sitting on the steps of the sanctuary again...listening...fidgeting...learning about you.

And especially we await the day when hugs abound. Until then, may we believe in your way, trust in your way and follow your way with a ceaseless desire to work for the greater good.

This we ask in the name of your son, Jesus Christ who taught us to pray saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.