

Feeding Stories

John 6:1-21

Today is the first of five Sundays which the lectionary spends in a single chapter of John's Gospel. We can think of it as "the bread chapter" for it begins with a story of literal bread offered to hungry people and then moves into extended metaphorical use of bread language and imagery. Over the course of the chapter, the message builds in complexity and intensity. Jesus speaks to his disciples of God giving bread from heaven and identifies himself as the "Bread of Life", finally coming to the declaration that "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." John makes it clear in this chapter of his Gospel that just as there can be no physical life without bread, there can be no lasting spiritual life without Jesus Christ, who is both the path to the Father and the source of sustenance for that journey.

This morning, we read the first section of this Bread Chapter, which includes the familiar story of Jesus feeding a large crowd of hungry people. Listen now for God's word to us this day.

This miracle of the multiplying loaves and fish is told in all four Gospels, one of very few events to be included in each of them. It is -- rightly -- one of the best-known episodes of Jesus' ministry. John's account, though similar to the other Gospels, does have several distinctive features: John says explicitly that the crowd follows Jesus because they have seen the "signs that he was doing for the sick"; only John places this miracle in the context of Passover; only John has Jesus speak first of the need to provide food. In the other three accounts, Jesus spends the afternoon teaching the assembled crowd; the disciples come to him as evening approaches and urge him to send the people away to find food. In John, while the crowd is still approaching, Jesus turns to the disciples Philip and asks a preemptive question about buying bread. John is the only Evangelist who identifies a young boy as the source of the meager supplies of bread and fish from which Jesus works his miracle. John's account of the account of the distribution and eating of the bread is very like that of the other three gospels, perhaps because early Christian eucharistic practice has shaped the narratives. Remarkably, all the Gospels agree on the numbers: there are 5,000 men there; 200 denarii worth of bread would not be enough; from five loaves and two fish come a meal for everyone gathered with twelve baskets of fragments left over. ¹

What shall we carry away from this story? There are any number of insights and lessons to be found here. And that's without even looking at the aftermath of the miracle when the people feel an inclination to make Jesus their king. Or at the miracle which follows close on the heels of this one, when Jesus walks across a stormy sea. Both of those episodes are also well worth our

¹ Harper-Collins Bible Commentary; p. 967
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attention. but they will have to wait for another day, because today, we are going to look at the act and the meaning of feeding people.

Commentator Wilma Ann Bailey writes of this story of loaves and fishes on a lakeshore: A large crowd comes toward Jesus, and he asks a question. He wants to know where they can get enough food to feed the crowd. The question is, why should he care? It is not his responsibility to feed a group of people because they choose to follow him. But Jesus knows that they must be hungry.²

The other Gospel writers all describe Jesus as having compassion for the crowd that has so determinedly followed him to this spot beside the Sea of Galilee. John focuses in immediately on Jesus expressing that compassion by identifying the practical need to provide some sort of nourishment for people who have left home to come find and follow Jesus, trusting that the sort of signs with which he has been healing and helping other people will also bless them.

People need to eat. That is as true today as it was on that long-ago day in Galilee. Here is a trio of stories about food and feeding.

From a recent issue of *Christian Century*: In February, some restaurant owners in small towns in northeast Oklahoma created “giving walls,” encouraging customers to prepay for meals and hang their receipt of the wall, so that anyone hungry and lacking cash can take a receipt and eat, no questions asked. One restaurant owner said her customers had contributed more than 300 meals. Sometimes a person who receives a meal will come back and purchase one to hang on the wall when they are able. “I want people in my community to be fed whether they have money for a meal or not,” said restaurant owner Jennifer White. (“Century Marks”; June 2, 2021)

From the April 26, 2020 issue of the *San Antonio Express News*: As it became apparent that the coronavirus pandemic was going to test the San Antonio Food Bank like never before, the non-profit’s leader welcomed calls from friends wanting to help.

Philanthropist G. P. Singh, a member of the city’s Sikh community, was one of the first to step forward, a response in keeping with that community’s long-time support of the Food Bank. The core of the Sikh faith is Seva, the practice of selfless service for people in need and, all over the world, that practice is regularly expressed through providing meals to hungry people. Within days, the Sikh Dharamsal of San Antonio had provided hundreds of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for distribution to 600 area households. They also very quickly raised approximately \$250,000 through the faith community’s “Together We Can” campaign. That gift, which included donations from Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Muslims along with the Sikhs, allowed

² Bailey; *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year B*; p. 341
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the Food Bank to purchase more than one million pounds of food as it worked to assist more than double the number of households who had been calling upon it before the pandemic.

And finally, this first-person story about the writer's experience in Africa was printed as part of the Humans of New York project:

Shortly after arriving in Lagos, my guide showed me a story that was being passed around Nigerian social media. There was a woman who'd been stopped in traffic behind a crowded prison truck, and she witnessed a food vendor running alongside, shoving his food between the bars of the window -- into the hands of the prisoners inside. By the time he was finished, he'd given away all his food. The man himself was in desperate circumstances. He was sleeping outdoors. But despite having hardly anything to give, he gave away all his merchandise. The man's name is Ibere Ugochukwu. This is his story:

A few years ago, I worked as an apprentice in a cosmetics shop. I was supposed to receive a payment at the end of my term. But I was warned by the other employees that the owner would find a reason not to pay me. He'd always invent reasons to fire his boys right before their payment. So I made the decision to quit. But when I told him, he dragged me to the police. He told them lies about me. He told them I'd stolen so much money. And they tortured me. They tied my hands and legs and they hung me from the ceiling. They beat me. I went deaf from all the slaps. For ten days, I was given no food. My fellow prisoners would share little bits of their meals when they were finished. But some days I saw nothing. Honestly, I was about to die. And I started to pray to God. And on the tenth day, the guards decided that it would cause too much trouble to let me die. They told my employer, "After what we did to him, he must be innocent. Because he'd have confessed if he was guilty." They released me into the world like a madman. And I've carried the memory ever since. I promised myself that if I ever found someone in a similar situation, I would help. So when I learned that prisoners pass down this road, I chose to hawk in this location. I waited until I finally saw the truck, and I pushed all my food through the bars. My fellow vendors couldn't believe it. They asked me who would pay me for the food. I told them: "I didn't do it for any man. I did it because of what God did for me."

When Jesus sees hungry people on the Galilean lakeshore, he could decide that their hunger is not his responsibility. But he feeds them with the meager rations available and he transforms five loaves and two fish into a feast for five thousand.

Our three contemporary feeding stories tell of people who could have decided that someone else's hunger was not their responsibility, but instead chose to do what they could with the loaves and fishes they had available, so that those who were hungry might be fed, might be included, might know the comfort and hope of being seen and cared about.

May we, too, tell compassionate, miraculous feeding stories with our words and acts and lives.

Amen.