

## Feeding a Crowd

Have you ever shared in the planning and preparation of a meal for a large number of people? Have you ever had the sole responsibility for planning and preparing to feed a crowd? Maybe it was a cookout for a gathering of your extended family. Maybe it was a church fifth-Sunday dinner. Or maybe it was lunch for a big group like the Fairfield Camp of Salkehatchie workers.

Whatever crowd you were feeding, did you work hard to make sure that everything was just right? Did you fret that everything might *not* be just right? It's likely that the one thing you were most concerned about was that there might not be enough food for everyone.

Now at every church meal I've ever been to, that's never seemed to be a problem. As United Methodists, we know that Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments of our Church. But we like to kid and joke about the covered dish dinner being our third sacrament. Because fellowship meals always seem to be blessed with more than enough food to go around—and with enough left over for more than a few “to go”

plates to be packaged up and taken to those who couldn't make it to worship that Sunday.

But sadly, there are many places in our country where there's *not* plenty to go around. Nearly forty-nine million people—about one out of every six Americans—are food insecure.

“According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Food insecurity...is a situation of ‘limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways,’” In other words, being food insecure means either that you're hungry or that you don't know where your next meal is coming from. Or both.

Here in South Carolina, the total food insecurity rate is *eighteen percent* of the population. Vicki Escarra, as president and CEO of Feeding America, reports that “Millions of Americans are unemployed and millions of others are working for reduced wages or working fewer hours. Many of these people never thought they would need a helping hand, but are now turning to programs like SNAP.”

SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Recent statistics disclose an average monthly income of only six

hundred fifty-two dollars for SNAP households in our state. Did you know that more than half of South Carolina SNAP recipients are senior citizens and children? Across this state and in Fairfield County, too, many children depend on breakfasts and lunches they eat at school, because there's little or no food in their homes. On weekends and during the summer, hunger is their companion.

Just as hunger was a companion of many in the first century. We tend to think that the world has changed in two thousand years, don't we? But it's been said that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Is today's economic divide between the well-fed and the hungry much different from the imperial Roman world into which Jesus was born? In that time, the powerful controlled the food supply. In that hierarchical social structure, ordinary working people struggled daily to get enough to eat. With limited access to nutritious food, many became ill. While the elite forces of empire dined on a great variety of sumptuous foods of the finest quality.

Which makes us think of Herod the tetrarch. That puppet of Rome. In the verses just before today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear about the birthday bash this Herod has thrown for himself. And during this lusty, boozy blowout with all his

buddies, Herod has let himself be manipulated into ordering the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus' cousin. Jesus' friend and companion. The herald of Jesus' ministry and mission. John has been murdered.

Grieving and heartsick, Jesus slips off to a deserted place. Alone. But a multitude follows him, follows Jesus. Who is all compassion. Since sunup, he's been healing the many who are sick. Now it's the evening of the day. The crowd is hungry.

And the nearest villages are a far piece down the road. In this remote area, there's no Bi-Lo. There's no Wal~Mart Supercenter to go to, even if the people had money to *purchase* food. But here come Jesus' disciples, pulling him off to the side. You know what they say to him: *It's suppertime. Tell all these people to go get themselves something to eat.*

If you and I had been with the twelve that day, how would *we* have dealt with the issue of feeding this crowd? Is there something in our human condition that—when we're confronted with the hungry—causes us, too, to say, or or at least think?—*Send them away. Let them go buy themselves some food.* Somewhere else!

The twelve are surprised by Jesus' answer. Jesus' answer takes *us* by surprise, too. Jesus says: *No way. You give them something to eat.*

*But, Jesus—they ask—how can we feed so many? All we've got is five meager loaves and a couple of fish. What we have doesn't begin to be enough to feed all these thousands.*

The first disciples can't see past their limited supply. And they believe that what they have is all there is.

Have we met the twelve and found that they are us? That we are a lot like them?

If so, do you think that could be because an earthly empire has persuaded us to embrace its doctrine of scarcity? Have we heard “hurry in—supplies are limited!” so many times that we've come to believe it? Have we allowed ourselves to be convinced that demand truly *does* exceed supply—which, of course, drives up the price? Have we allowed ourselves to be convinced that we need to spend more, buy more, acquire more, consume more? Have we allowed ourselves to be convinced that what we have is not enough?

And have we allowed ourselves to be convinced that what we have is not enough to *share*? Are we—like those first

followers of Jesus—unable to think outside the box? Have we become firmly entrenched in the belief that what we have could never be sufficient, could never play even the smallest part in feeding a crowd, in satisfying the hunger of the undernourished one in nine of this world’s seven and a half billion people?

If our answer to these questions is “yes,” then Jesus’ instruction today is for us. We listen not only with our ears, but also with our hearts. We listen when Jesus commands: *Bring what you have here. Bring your loaves and your fish to me.*

When those first disciples turn what they see as their limited resources over to Jesus, amazing things start to happen. The crowd is fed. Every last one of them. Every man, woman and child.

When we turn what we see as *our* limited resources over to Jesus Christ, amazing things start to happen. Miraculous things start to happen through Jesus Christ. This is good news! This story of feeding a crowd is *such* good news that each one of the four gospel writers knew he had to include it in his account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

For this story is the fulfillment of prophecy—the prophecy of Mary, the mother of Jesus. He is the One Mary of Nazareth

sings about. He is the One through whom the hungry are filled with good things. Because somehow, after we give what we have to Jesus, there's enough for every hungry person to be filled. There's plenty to go around—and there are even leftovers! After we bring what we have to Jesus, he gives us back what we've brought him. Gives it back to us to give to the many who are hungry.

In both word and deed, he reminds us that we—not Jesus—are to be the ones who feed them. When we do, we are accomplishing God's good intention, God's desire, God's perfect will that the hungry be fed. Jesus teaches that whether we feed them or do not feed them will have an impact on our ultimate destiny. He's told us that when the least of these who are members of his family are hungry and we give them food, we are actually doing it for him.

For this One who guides us into the understanding that what we have is not all there is. And when do understand, we go, rejoicing, into the world with what we, a believing community, have to share. We go, rejoicing, into the world with the knowledge that many other believing communities walk with us, all carrying what *they* have to share. We go, rejoicing, into the

world with the bread that Jesus is still multiplying. The bread with which Christ is still working wonders.

The bread with which Jesus Christ is sending us out to feed a crowd. But before he does, he feeds *us*. Just as he did on that Galilean hillside, at a table in an upper room, Jesus takes bread and he blesses it and he breaks it and he gives it to his first disciples. And at every table of grace, he gives it to his followers today. Nourishes us. Sustains us. With the precious gift of himself. The Bread of Life.

It's not a death-dealing dinner like Herod's. It's the Lord's life-giving supper.

And it's a foretaste of the meal offered by the One who is setting a table on another shore and in a greater light. The table of the One whose wondrous abundance will feed a crowd at a heavenly banquet. The table at which *you* have the blessed hope of feasting!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.