



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 28, 2024
2 KINGS 4:42-44; PSALM 145:10-19; EPHESIANS 3:14-21; JOHN 6:1-21

ARE YOU HUNGRY?

My mother grew up in a poor family on the west side of Cleveland, Ohio. The fact that she was born during the Great Depression and that WWII was co-extensive with her childhood didn't help her food security. She lived in a household shepherded by her grandmother. Grandma Costello, we called her. Grandma Costello baked multiple loaves of bread every Monday and the supply was expected to last through the week. My mom told us stories of living with hunger as a constant companion. Sometimes, she and her siblings would eat "ketchup sandwiches" because there was nothing else to eat. Dessert was often another slice of bread

with butter and sugar on it. She knew the pain and shame of hunger and poverty.

I think she told us these stories because my life was so different from hers. I did not know hunger as a child. In fact, all I knew was abundance when it came to food and meals. We were not well off, but my mother cooked all the time, for everyone, and she invited all to our table. She always prepared too much food, just in case a guest stopped by. If I was playing with a friend in the afternoon, she would invite the kid to dinner. If a travelling salesperson came to the door at the right time, they were invited to dinner. When we were having a spat with

a family down the street, my mom attempted reconciliation by inviting the whole clan of our enemies to dinner. They declined, but my mother explained that “we only eat with our friends. If they join us at table, they are like family to us.” She also said, “God has given us more than we need. It’s our duty to share it with others.” It’s my belief that she was so committed to feeding others because she knew firsthand what it felt like to be chronically hungry. She turned her pain and misfortune into a mission of service.

This week, our Gospel centers around Jesus's multiplication of the loaves and fishes—the only Jesus story that appears *six* times across the four gospels. Clearly, this event meant a lot to the early church. But what can it mean to us, here, now, in the 21st century?

In its original setting, I can easily imagine how Jesus' actions would have resonated with the crowds who flocked around him. They were colonized peasants. Overworked, underpaid, and malnourished. They knew the agony of an empty table. They knew what hunger felt like and the dread of watching their children cry for bread.

Jesus' feeding miracles were intended to speak abundance into a culture of scarcity. But we live in a culture of excess. Excess messaging, packaging, consuming, and dieting. We hardly know how to hear the word “abundance” in a positive light; we're too scared of its dangers to trust in its promise. For some of us, food is an idol. For others, an enemy. For still others, food is an addiction coated in secrecy and self-loathing.

I worry that we miss the impact of Jesus' powerful message because we aren't in touch with our hunger, though all of us have a poverty of some sort or another. How would we respond if Jesus performed a loaves-and-fishes miracle now, in our contemporary midst? Would we allow ourselves to enjoy his generosity? Would we savor his offering, or would we hem, haw, and hesitate? St. John's version of this miracle says that the crowds ate and “were satisfied.” Would we be able to say that? Or would we say something more like:

“We ate and looked around to see if we'd eaten more or less than the people sitting next to us.”

"We ate, and immediately started calculating: 700 calories? 900? How long on the treadmill to undo this damage?"

"We ate, but only the fish, not the bread. You know. *Carbs.*"

"We didn't eat. We gorged."

When Jesus fed the multitudes, people sat down together, taking only what they needed so that everyone got enough. The point was not to scheme, conserve, or quantify. The point was not to clamor for more. The point, very simply, was to enjoy the gift of a single day's portion in the company of others. Abundance didn't have to lead to gluttony. Food didn't have to lead to fear, isolation, and shame.

But when Jesus fed the multitudes, he was also acknowledging what we so often try to forget: that we are physical beings, with legitimate physical needs. We're not airy spirits; we are embodied spirits, and those bodies themselves are gifts from God. Gifts worthy of honor and care.

In fact, I would argue that Jesus was able to perform the miracle he did precisely because he took basic human need so seriously. When his disciples looked at the crowds, they saw only their own

insufficiency. Their own scant resources. The impossibility of the situation. "Where are we going to get enough bread for these people to eat?"

But Jesus allowed himself to see genuine need, and he allowed that need to hit him squarely in his own gut. In the face of the crowd's deep hunger, despair couldn't be an option; someone had to act. Maybe it's only when we get in touch with our own deepest needs—for nourishment, for companionship, for help, for love, for mercy and forgiveness—that we can extend a generous table to others. Maybe we need to be overcome by our own hungers before we can turn abstract compassion into life-saving action.

My friends, Jesus' feeding miracles were his self-revelations. He *gave* bread because he *is* Bread. He fed hungry bodies because he, too, inhabited and honored a body. We believe in a God who comes to us as food, our food, to satisfy our deepest hunger.

So, we pray: *Lord, be known to us. In our own bodies, which are your temple. In the giving and receiving of good gifts and in the breaking of the bread. Amen.*

John 6:1-21 [*Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.]*



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