

Baskets Full of Broken Pieces
a sermon by
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Readings: 1 Kings 17:8-16
Mark 6:27-44

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1 Kings 17:8-16

⁸Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 6:27-44

²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. ³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” ³⁷But he answered them, “You give them something

to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²And all ate and were filled; ⁴³and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

In both of our scriptures this morning, everyone is hungry. The widow and her son, who feed the prophet Elijah—all three of them are starving, until she is convinced to give away the last little bit of her food. The disciples, the crowd, and presumably Jesus—none of them have eaten all day. And at this time on Sunday morning, some of you may be getting hungry too. Consider that a kind of special effect, adding to the atmosphere in which we contemplate this story. Because these stories are as much about being hungry as they are about being fed.

The disciples and Jesus haven’t had time to eat or to rest. They are hungry for food and for downtime. And the crowd comes out starving for the gospel, and ends up hungry for bread as well, led by their hunger to a place without any food other than what they themselves have brought. They come to a place where there is no bread, other than the bread they can manage to share.

Bread is the theme of the adult ed year that is about to begin—bread as food, bread as money, and the bread of life. What I’m realizing in thinking about all of that is that actual, physical bread, involving yeast and grain, is the product of civilization. It’s the product of sedentary communities and agriculture, of the specialization of labor. Bread is the product of the village—the farmer, the miller, the home maker, and even the engineer. It’s difficult to make bread without a field or a market at which to grow or buy the grain, a mill at which to grind it, a neighbor to donate the starter or the yeast, and the oven, almost a building in itself, in which to bake it. A loaf of bread takes a village.

But when the five thousand are fed, the village is far away. Jesus has invited the disciples, “come away to a wilderness place.” A deserted place—in fact, the desert itself. The term is repeated three times in this story, emphasizing its loneliness, its lack. And with the disciples, the thousands have come too—away from all buildings and occupations, the mill and market and the hearth.

So the feeding of them all comes out of nowhere, the nowhere of this nothing place. This bread that feeds is not the bread of civilization. It is bread outside of the local economy, neither worked for nor bought, but freely given, created in the sharing of it.

Even for us, even when our lives seem less than miraculous, food remains magical. Baking, cooking, and then eating—it's pure chemistry on the one hand (chemists tend to be good cooks!) and a minor miracle every time it happens on the other. When I was in graduate school, struggling to write yet one more paper or do one more hour of research, a friend and I discussed how often we procrastinated on our work by taking time out to bake. Our mutual concern was that we would end up many pounds heavier before we managed to get the degree. I said, "I think I'm drawn to baking because after trying to think abstract thoughts all day long, it's a relief to get into something concrete and hands-on." She understood immediately. "Absolutely," she said, "reading and writing will never be as satisfying as baking something and eating it." I want to embroider that on a pillow, I thought. I never did, but it's stayed with me regardless.

Food is magical. Remember the movie *Babette's Feast*? Where the old Scandinavian Protestants who've been eating mostly pickled fish discover the joys of indulging in a wonderful French meal? Remember the movie *Chocolat* or the movie *Like Water for Chocolate*, in both of which food has the ability to bring joy or tears or passion? Remember *Alice in Wonderland*? *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? *James and the Giant Peach*? Movie-makers, storytellers, know that food is magical.

We all know families in which food is love. And that's not a mistake, let me say. It's a mistake to insist that children or guests overeat, that everyone clean their plate, that mountains of high calorie food must accompany every gathering. But preparing food for others, serving it to them, sharing it with them—that is love, love in an embodied form that almost everyone can experience as love.

When my favorite aunt was 16, she was hit by a car as she was crossing the street and both her legs were broken. She told me many decades later that she remembered lying in her hospital bed, alone after her family had gone home, scared and hungry. A nurse came by and asked if she needed anything. The only piece of what she needed that my aunt could convey was, "I'm kind of hungry." The nurse managed to rustle her up some toast—just dry toast, no

jam or butter even. My aunt said later that that dry toast tasted like heaven to her, it seemed to be the best thing she'd ever eaten. It tasted, I suspect, like love, because it meant that someone had heard her, someone in that scary white hospital cared.

Serving food to others is a powerful act of connection. Anyone who has ever known the deep pleasure of feeding an infant knows the truth that food is love. It is the first expression of love we understand. Throughout our lives it remains almost the easiest way to make love felt, second only to touch.

Which is why, when thousands of people have rushed to hear Jesus speak his word, when they have left the daily business of their lives to hear and see and experience the news that God is love, Jesus will not have them sent away hungry. The people come to him hungry, starving it would appear, for something. Maybe they are ill and have heard of Jesus' healings. Or they are poor and have heard that Jesus cares. Or they are simply confused, or sad, afraid that life has in the end no meaning. Certainly, they are hungry. So hungry that they race to follow him. They will not be put off even when he gets into a boat. They calculate his destination and arrive, comically, ahead of him—just like Bugs Bunny used to do with Elmer Fudd. They're that hungry.

Jesus sees them as like sheep without a shepherd, the gospel tells us. Sheep without someone to lead them to good pastures. Sheep wandering aimlessly, vulnerable and hungry.

Jesus talks to them, tells them the good news that they have come to hear, but telling them about God's love and forgiveness is not enough. Even healing and restoring them one by one would not be enough. He brings God's love to bear upon them here and now, as a crowd, as a community. He feeds them.

Send them away, the disciples suggest, so they can get some food. But Jesus has a better idea: "Give them something to eat." They're hungry? Feed them. Seems simple enough. The disciples are annoyed, no doubt by exactly the simplicity. "Right," they say sarcastically, "so you want us to spend all the money we don't have on the food that's not available, is that it?" They have neither the food nor the money; and in their experience, meals don't just happen out of thin air.

I'm so glad to have Rachel here on board here, for so many reasons—she's a great colleague and it's a privilege to have a ringside seat as she begins her work with the children of this church. Plus I'm hopeful we can exchange dog sitting services at some point. But right now my top reason for being glad she's here is that she gave me a nice illustration for this sermon. She told me the story of a group of Sunday school kids she was working with who were choosing their favorite Bible stories and thinking through those stories. One little girl had chosen the feeding of the five thousand. And this little girl told Pastor Rachel, I don't think I would have liked to be a disciple. Why not? Rachel asked. "If I had been a disciple, I would have worried the whole time I was handing out the bread," she said, "whether there was really going to be enough for everybody. I would have handed each person only a little bit, to try and make sure that there would be some left for the people at the back of the crowd. Jesus would have known for sure that there would be enough bread for everybody, but if I were a disciple, I would have worried about it."

Rachel's young parishioner is no doubt right. Most of us would have been worrying that there wasn't enough, had we been in the disciples' place, handing out the broken bread that day. We would have wanted to warn Jesus that this was a stupid plan, that it could end up in a riot of the hungry people at the back. We would have been tempted to break off only very small pieces of bread for each person, leaving everyone almost as hungry as they came.

The message of the feeding, though, is that against all our so-called realism, against all our doubt and anxiety, there is enough. Not just barely enough. But plenty, for everyone. Plenty, and then some. Plenty, with baskets and baskets left over.

In the United States, and even in the world, we know that there really is enough. There is enough land and rain and food for all God's children to eat well. Yet all God's children do not eat well. Just in the US alone, diabetes is on the rise in children. Hunger, nearly eradicated in this country by 1970, is back with a vengeance, bringing with it an epidemic of obesity, since junk food is cheap and fattening. One out of every two American children will at some time be on food assistance—food assistance, incidentally, which pays about \$3 a day. That one-out-of-two statistic doesn't count those families who don't qualify for assistance, but still don't have enough money for food and the bills. Did you know that in recent decades, American armed forces recruits often break bones in basic training, because they are both overweight and suffering from calcium deficiency. In the United States. There is plenty here to eat. We

do not live in an actual desert. Maybe it's anxiety that there won't be enough for everyone--that there can't possibly be enough for everyone--that makes us break our bread into such tiny pieces as to feed no one well. No doubt there is a constellation of reasons and processes involved, some of which I hope we learn more about over the course of this adult ed year. But whatever the reasons, the fact is that we are not feeding one another. If food is love, then we are not loving one another.

The trouble with not feeding others is that you end up starving yourself. If my neighbor is hungry, I can eat great food, but I cannot eat entirely in peace, not without losing a little of my humanity. My health, my peace, my nourishment, is tied to the nourishment and health and peace of my neighbor.

This is something we've always known. It's the reason that we tip. Because it's inherently wrong, in almost any culture, to sit and eat, while others who may be hungry watch. So tipping the waiter was a way to make sure that the hungry waiter would not give the evil eye to those who ate. You leave the waiter money so that he too can eat and drink—the word tip is related to the work tipple, to drink. The tip enables the waiter to enjoy a meal, and that allows you to eat your meal without fear.

We have always known on some level that we are meant to eat together, to share our resources. We are meant to participate in what John Dominic Crossan calls the distributive justice of God, finding our own peace and nourishment in the peace and nourishment of others.

Just before the disciples follow Jesus out into the wilderness, we've heard the end of John the Baptist's story. That story also ended in a meal, but not in a good way. Refusing to eat civilized food, existing on locusts and wild honey in the wilderness, John was not invited to Herod's table to share the royal feast. He arrives only on a platter, as though to be the meal's final course. John's death seems to nourish all that is wrong with Herod's court and Herod's rule. But John's life, Herod knows, has empowered Jesus. While others guess as to who this Jesus might be, Herod knows—*John whom I beheaded has come back and that is where the miracles of Jesus come from* (Mark 6:14-16). From the unstoppable drive toward justice of a silenced, hungry prophet, thousands of people now sit on the grass in groups, eating a plentiful feast.

The feeding of the five thousand comes out of nowhere. But Jesus does not produce thousands of loaves of bread from thin air. Jesus never waves his hand and makes something appear out of nothing. Food is magical, but the feeding of the five thousand is not a magic trick. Jesus draws the miracle from the doubtful and anxious disciples, encouraging them to step however doubtfully through the actions of a meal until a meal appears. Jesus draws the baskets of bread from the hungry crowd itself. They believe, they assume that everyone will eat—they sit down like compliant children and pass the loaves and eat. Even John the Baptist's unjust death contributes to the feeding of the five thousand, just as the lynching of young Emmet Till pushed this country toward passage of the Civil Rights Act. The feeding of the five thousand comes out of nowhere, out of the wilderness, where there's nothing. But resources appear where we thought there were none. Even nothing turns out to be plenty. Even injustice turns out to be fuel.

When the disciples started this journey to the wilderness, they hadn't eaten in a while. They never do get the chance they are looking for to sit down and share a quiet meal with Jesus. They are looking to eat, but find themselves feeding instead. Only in the act of feeding, giving out what they don't even feel that they have, giving from that empty, wilderness place inside, only in the act of feeding are the disciples fed. They eat the bread that is passed around to and by thousands. With not enough money and not enough food, they reach out to others in doubt, but they do reach out. And that's when everyone eats with plenty to spare.

Giving doesn't require abundance. Giving produces the abundance. When we can give out and gather up all our resources freely, emptying our last cup of grain and oil out for strangers, when we can put aside our fear that there might not be enough, then it happens. Abundance, satisfaction, nourishment, joy, peace. Baskets and baskets of lovely broken bread, an abundance of broken pieces, enough to feed the world and to feed our own souls as well.

Amen.