"MORE LEFTOVERS"

Ephesians 3:14-20; Mark 6:30-44
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I don't know why people complain about eating leftovers. I'm always delighted when I remember that we have leftovers in the fridge ready to heat up for dinner. It's like a little gift of extra time and abundance, as well as some tasty and nourishing food. It's also a reminder of how fortunate we are that, on any given day, we have enough, and more than enough. This isn't the reality for a great many people in our world, so it's not something to take for granted.

Having "extra" probably wasn't an everyday experience for many of the people who came out into the countryside to see and hear Jesus, either. Nor would it have been for most of the early Christians for whom Mark wrote his gospel. The fact that there are *leftovers* in this story of a meal in which a little bit of food somehow feeds a huge crowd serves to say, "Pay attention. There is a miracle here, but the miracle is only the beginning. There's even more to this story."

You've probably heard Jerry or I, from time to time, mention that one Jesus story or another can be found in more than one or two of the gospels, and that this generally suggests that it was widely known and considered significant throughout the different communities of the early church. There aren't actually all that many stories told by all three of the more similar gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and even fewer told by those three and John as well. But this story, about Jesus feeding a huge crowd of people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, is told *six* times in the four gospels. I kind of knew that, but when I really stopped to ponder it, it made me rethink this very familiar story. Six times. That must mean we ought to pay special attention.

Luke and John both tell it, and Matthew and Mark each tell it twice. Now, the details differ a little bit: In Matthew and Mark, one version mentions 5,000 people; the other has 4,000. (Matthew adds "not counting women and children.") John doesn't bother estimating crowd size. The number of loaves of bread is either five or seven, and perhaps there were two fish, or "a few." The conversations recounted between Jesus and his disciples are somewhat different from one version to another, as are a few other details. But it's essentially the same story. A large and hungry crowd. A small quantity of bread and fish, gathered up and brought to Jesus by some of his disciples. Jesus takes the bread and blesses it. All the people in the crowd eat until they are full. And there are leftovers. Twelve baskets, or seven, depending on which account you read.

I don't know why Mark and Matthew tell this twice. Maybe there really were two occasions during Jesus' ministry when something similar took place; but that doesn't necessarily explain telling both of the stories, since each of the gospel writers chose what to include (or omit) in order to emphasize what they felt was most important. Maybe Mark heard two different versions and couldn't decide between them, and Matthew followed Mark's storyline. Maybe

there is subtle meaning in the differences. In any case, the gospels tell us about Jesus feeding people – a lot of people – with a little food that becomes enough for leftovers, six times.

Today we are looking at the Mark 6 version of the story:

Jesus and his disciples have been on a speaking tour around the region, and they are all set to have a quiet retreat and rest up a bit… but those plans are put aside when a "great crowd" of people show up.

Why not send them away? Because Jesus sees the crowd and has compassion for them.

To Jesus, these people aren't a crowd, they aren't a "cause," or an "issue," or a bunch of statistics. He sees their humanity. He sees people whose souls and bodies need nourishing. And so he does that, teaching them "many things" – I kind of wish we knew exactly what! – and then feeding them… even though at first glance it seems like there is nothing to feed them with.

This is a "reign of God" story, counter-cultural to our economy (perhaps to all human economies). We're used to an economy driven by competition that arises from the fear of scarcity. This is a story of abundance. I want to be careful in saying that, because what I *don't* mean is "God wants to give you everything you can imagine wanting, if only you have enough faith." Inevitably, this ends up as justification of the greed that causes some to have too much and others to have too little. The abundance of the reign of God is not excess for some, but enough and more than enough for all.

The "economy" of the "loaves and fishes" centers the human need. It's a story about a stupendous miracle. It doesn't matter if you take it entirely literally or if you want to consider some rational explanations for what might have happened or if you see it simply as a story with a spiritual meaning. The story itself is about an incredible miracle, and yet the Jesus we see here doesn't make it about himself and his power. Compassion drives what he does, and his compassion is focused on the people whose hungers he responds to.

This "reign of God" story is an inclusive story. Everyone is invited to sit and eat. There's no test, nothing anyone has to do to demonstrate their need, or their worthiness, or their residency status, or the correctness of the beliefs they hold, or their conformity to social norms. This is in complete contrast to the thinking that pervades every part of our social safety net, our politics, our public and private conversation, and even sometimes the church's mission: the idea that it's really important – a top priority even – to make sure that nobody deemed "undeserving" benefits from… whatever it is that's available. Where did we come by that assumption? Not from Jesus.

The sense of generosity, welcome, abundance that flows from Jesus' compassion is the abiding impression this story leaves with us.

But there are other things to notice, too:

This is a story about the church. (Remember that the gospels were written for the early Christian communities.) If you were to skim through all six versions of the story, in every one you'd read that Jesus took the loaves of bread that were brought, and blessed them, and gave them to the people…. almost the same exact words that describe Jesus' actions at his last supper with his friends before his death, words we hear at the communion table. Clearly we are supposed to connect this story with the Lord's Supper. But this is a far cry from the way the church has limited access to the table. This story offers a vision of an inclusive church and a table of welcome.

You may have noticed that Jesus' doesn't let his disciples just sit by while he makes a miracle here. To their credit, the disciples seem to share Jesus' compassion for the people's situation, if not his confidence that there is a solution. They come to Jesus and suggest that it might be time to send everyone on their way, so they can get themselves some supper. What Jesus says to them is what Jesus might say to us, when we bemoan the fact that people around us are hungry (in body or soul): "you give them something to eat." "We don't have enough," they say. "What do you have?" Jesus says. Now there's some food for thought we could ponder all day long.

But there's more here:

Mark's Jewish readers wouldn't have missed the ways his connects this story to the history of their faith. The provision of miraculous food in a deserted area is a reminder of how the people of Israel were fed with manna in the wilderness. Jesus "shepherd-like" compassion and guidance (and the mention of "green grass") reference the 23rd Psalm.

But I'd also suggest that this story invites looking forward in our faith, as well as looking back. The miracle is done, the people fed. But there are leftovers. There's something to take forward – for tomorrow's lunch, maybe. For sharing. As a sign that God will provide. As evidence that the story isn't finished. As a reminder that God's grace is, and will continue to be, abundant.

The longer I look at this story, the more I see. The more I wonder whether this story should be more central, more formative, more defining for those of us who follow Jesus.

It has something to say to us about nearly every aspect of our lives as followers of Jesus.

It speaks to the way we treat one another. The ways we help others. The centrality of compassion. It addresses the question, "what does it mean to be like Jesus?"

It tells us that we are meant to be involved in Jesus' work of compassion – not passive recipients or mere observers. It asks us to bring what we have of resources or skills, and believe that Jesus can do something wonderful with it.

This story informs our cultural and political conversations. It speaks to our fears about scarcity. It questions our assumptions about competition. It asks us to see, really *see*, people. It asks us not to look away from needs. It asks us to think differently about these things.

It speaks to the hungers of our souls, as well as our physical needs, and reminds us that both are important, and inseparable… that both need to be attended to.

It offers a perspective on the church and the table that challenges us to reconsider how we view the faith community, and the sacrament of communion.

It suggests that we should sit down to every meal with gratitude for God's abundance, but also remembering the hungry.

It encourages us to remember who we are – to look back at and see how God has been with us and provided, sometimes in ways that were wholly unexpected.

It also invites us to look forward with hope and expectation, trusting that whatever the future brings, the compassion of Jesus will meet us there and God will provide what we need.

I hope you like leftovers as much as I do, because this is a sermon with "leftovers" – an abundance of food for thought to take with you and enjoy later. I can't put it in a cardboard container for you, but I hope you'll take it and ponder it. This is nourishment for the soul, strength for the journey. May God bless it to us.

Resources:

Essays on Mark 6:30-34, from *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, Cynthia A Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds.