

Holy Leftovers

John 6:1-15

After this 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 I was growing up, I was fortunate enough that my family was able to take lots of vacations together. Often these were road trips to visit my extended family, most of whom lived in Maine, where my parents had grown up. The drive from Appleton to Maine is a pretty long one, so one of the things my sisters and I did to prepare was to pack a bag for the car. The contents of these bags changed as we got older, but generally they included things to keep us entertained and occupied: books, music, games...

The other critical item to have in the car was the food box. A week before we left, my Mom would take requests for snacky items to put in the food box. Cookies, crackers, fruit... anything that might keep us satisfied and not whining was allowed in. See, Dad didn't like to stop for food. We drove past plenty of cities and towns, gas stations, restaurants, and other food sources. But with the exception of dinner, we didn't stop to eat.

So what draws my eye in this story is that only one person has brought food along. The crowd, we're told, is 5,000 strong. And really? The only person with even a snack is a young boy? There aren't any Moms with crackers in their diaper bags? No young men with a pouch of

beef jerky? Well, I guess if there had been, this wouldn't have been nearly as good of a story to tell.

But frankly, one of the reasons this particular miracle is the only miracle told in all four gospels is because of what a good story it is. And it's not just the fact that it's a miracle that makes it a good story. This story connects with other Bible stories in a way that should really get our brains thinking this morning.

The first story I want us to think about is one John lifts up himself. He says that this whole event took place just before Passover. Do you all remember the story of Passover? The Jews were still living in slavery in Egypt – though Moses was in the middle of his 'negotiations' with Pharaoh to let them leave. The final plague is one that kills the firstborn of every family. But God instructs Moses to have the people mark their doorways and celebrate a sacred meal. God will see these houses and pass over them, thus saving all of the Jewish firstborn children.

Two things about this story are going to be important for us. First, God instructs the Jews on what to do with their Passover leftovers. They may either eat them immediately (in which case they're not really leftovers), or they can burn them. Nothing is allowed to remain. Second, this story lives on as an incredibly important moment in Jewish history. This is a moment when God saved the lives of the firstborn children, but also when God freed all Jews from slavery and began leading them to the Promised Land.

Our gospel writer doesn't give us any other explicit references to other Biblical stories, but we don't have to work hard to find them. The next story I think of is that as the Jews were on their Exodus to the Promised Land, God fed them in the wilderness with manna. Do you remember this story? The Israelites were so hungry and desperate in the wilderness that they actually contemplated returning to slavery instead of walking onward. So God sends them

manna, a sort of bready substance, that appears every morning. And what I want you to remember about this story this morning, is that it is another instance in which leftovers matter. The only time the Israelites are allowed to keep leftovers is on the day before the Sabbath. Any other day, if they save their manna, it turns moldy and rotten overnight.

The final story I want us to think about is the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert. This happens right after his baptism. Like the Israelites, Jesus is out in the wilderness, but he's fasting on purpose. After 40 days of fasting, the devil shows up to tempt Jesus. Remember what he says? If you're the son of God, then why don't you just do a miracle and turn these stones into bread? But Jesus refuses, saying, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." There are two things I want you to remember about this story. First, Jesus could've done a miracle, but he chose not to. Second, he explicitly says that the word of God feeds us just as much as physical food.

We have these three related stories: Passover, manna in the desert, and Jesus tempted in the wilderness. So now let's return to this morning's story. The Feeding of the 5,000. The story starts with Jesus trying to get away from the crowd. First he takes a boat across the sea – but the crowd follows by walking around on land. Have any of you ever taken the ferry across Lake Michigan? It's a lot faster than driving, isn't it? If you took the ferry, and a friend of yours then drove from Manitowoc, through Illinois and Indiana, and finally up into Michigan, you'd expect to get there long before your friend. That's what's going on here, although on a much smaller scale. Jesus gets to the other side first, but the crowd is persistent and shows up not much later.

When crossing the sea doesn't work, Jesus tries going up a mountain with the disciples. Well, if he'd thought about it, Jesus might've realized that the mountain was less of an obstacle than the sea. So naturally, the crowd follows right up the mountain. Rather than continuing to

escape, Jesus decides to feed the crowd. Jesus doesn't feed every hungry crowd that follows him, so why this one? Is he frustrated that they keep following? Does he feel sorry for them, that he keeps leading them further from home? Is there a lesson for the crowd – and for us – in this miracle? When Jesus is tempted in the desert, he could've done a miracle but doesn't. Regardless of his reason, in this story, Jesus doesn't have to do a miracle, but he does.

Because Jesus does this miracle, he is able to demonstrate that God isn't just enough. God is more than enough. And he starts teaching this lesson when he asks Philip about buying bread. Philip answers that they'd need close to a year's wages to buy enough food for everyone. Not to mention, they're all sitting on top of a mountain, and there's not exactly a McDonald's around the corner. Now Jesus is not dumb; he knows all of this already. So why bother asking the question? This is a setup. It's like the beginning of a magic show, when a volunteer comes forward. The magician asks the volunteer if they've met before, if the volunteer has been prepped ahead of time. And the magician says, "Look! Nothing up my sleeves!" All of this to prove that what's about to happen should be impossible. And Jesus is doing the same thing. He's saying to Philip, without God, it would be impossible to feed all these people. Now let's see what can happen with God.

Jesus does have some raw materials to work with. In this version of the story, he has five barley loaves and two fish. If there were no miracle, how many people do you think could eat from this? Ten people? Twenty? Depending on how satisfied the people are after the meal. But it's obvious that this isn't enough to feed the whole crowd. Jesus starts with this 'not enough,' and somehow he ends up with 12 baskets of leftovers! Is that just Jesus showing off? Turning 'not enough' into 'more than enough?'

Remember the stories of Passover and manna in the desert. For the Jewish people, how you deal with your leftovers is important. In this story, Jesus says, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” Jesus is concerned that the leftovers not be wasted. But unfortunately, the story doesn’t go on to tell us the rest of the story. What happens to these leftovers?

This is where the story becomes a choose-your-own-adventure. Take a stab at it; make your best guess. I’ve come up with several ideas. Maybe when Jesus was serving the crowd, this was an example of Family Hold Back – the principle of feeding your guests before the family gets a chance. Maybe these 12 baskets of food were a meal for Jesus and the disciples. On the other hand, maybe Jesus returned these leftovers to the boy who supplied the initial food. Maybe more people were still arriving – people who had a hard time getting around the lake and up the mountain. Or maybe new people have heard that Jesus is providing a free meal. And the leftovers may be sitting out to serve those who have come late. I’m sure you can come up with other creative ideas yourself.

But there’s one last option I’d like to share with you. Remember what Jesus says when he’s tempted in the desert? He says we shall not live by bread alone. Bread, by itself, is not enough. No matter how much of it we have, bread is not enough to really sustain us. If we are going to live fulfilling lives, we also need to have God’s word in our lives. The Jews that are gathered around Jesus are well aware of their history. They know the stories of how God uses bread to reassure his people that God is with them.

They also know that no matter how many baskets of leftovers you gather, you can’t depend on those leftovers to be present tomorrow. But Jesus doesn’t destroy these leftovers. Something is different about them. So if this bread represents God’s word, by not burning or throwing out the leftovers, Jesus is giving this crowd a powerful message. Bread is not enough. Even when there are leftovers, it’s not enough. But God’s word is enough. It’s more than enough. And God will be with you today, and tomorrow, and every tomorrow after that. Amen and amen.