

Leftovers

2 Kings 4:42-44 & John 6:1-14

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First Presbyterian, Luling

When I was little, and I would ask what was for supper, and my mom would say “leftovers,” I would try to wait till I was out of her eyesight and earshot to groan, roll my eyes, or sigh deeply and meaningfully. I did not like leftovers. My dad would call them, in fact still calls them “leftunders.” Once I got to high school or so, one grandmother and then the other became our saviors from leftovers. Mom would start making up plates of food for them, usually from our leftovers, so they could just warm them up for their suppers. Everyone was happy about this situation. No more leftover nights for us, and grandmothers got meals they didn’t have to cook.

I was definitely not an appreciator of leftovers. Until, that is, I started cooking for four people all the time. While I still don’t love to eat leftovers, I surely do enjoy opening the fridge and finding some there, ready to go with just a little warming up. Leftovers save us time and money, and it turns out, can be a very good thing. Live and learn, right?

The blessing of even having leftovers means that we have plenty to eat, that no one is going hungry in our house, that we have electricity to keep the leftovers from spoiling, and that we have an abundance, more than what we strictly need. Not everyone in the world can say that. Not even everyone in our community can say that. Leftovers are a luxury.

This time through the story of Jesus feeding the 5000, especially in combination with the Old Testament Elisha story that Jay read, what jumps out to me is the leftovers. Twelve baskets of leftovers, when all they started with was five loaves and two fish from a boy’s lunchbox, and after everyone had eaten all they wanted. Twelve baskets. This is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels, and all four gospels agree that there were twelve baskets of leftovers when the meal was finished.

The Elisha story is similar, except they had more food to start with and fewer people. Twenty loaves of barley, which were ready to eat, and fresh ears of grain, which I assume were not ready to eat as-is but would have required some sort of time-consuming preparation. And only one hundred people. If my math is right, that’s five people per loaf of barley, which doesn’t seem like enough food to fill everyone up, much less have leftovers. But the Lord had spoken to Elisha, and

assured him that there would be food left. And Elisha trusted the Lord's word, even though his servant was skeptical, and there was plenty of food to go around, with some leftover.

The feeding of the 500 in John is a little bit different, in subtle ways, than the same story in the other gospels. It's hard to keep them separate, at least for me, but there are a couple of things to point out. The most obvious one is the boy, who has five loaves and two fish that he is obviously willing to share, or he could easily have kept them concealed. There isn't much said about him, but he's only in John's version.

It's not as easy to notice, but in the other gospels, Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people. In John, they bring the boy's food to Jesus, and Jesus himself distributes first the bread and then the fish to all 5000 people. It's a moment when Jesus is able to connect directly with the members of the crowd. He then instructs the disciples to pick up the leftovers, of which there are twelve baskets, one basket for each disciple.

I don't know if any scholars agree with me, but the Gospel of John seems to me to be about abundance, the gracious, overflowing abundance of God. It opens with the wedding at Cana, where Jesus's first sign is to make an abundance of wine. Here, in this story, an abundance of bread, also at the hands of Jesus. There's even an abundance of fish, at the very end, when the risen Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. And there's this, in chapter 10, in the good shepherd section, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The abundance here, not just of the bread that formed the meal, but even of the leftovers, is striking. We are probably supposed to be thinking of the Elisha story, as John is making sure we understand that Jesus is in the mold of the Old Testament prophets. Those leftovers were abundant, too.

I do wonder what the disciples did with the baskets of leftovers. The next thing that John narrates is that they are in the boat, going across the Sea of Galilee again. It seems unlikely that they were hauling twelve baskets of leftover bread in the boat with them. I imagine that they knew what a blessing leftovers were, that they knew that leftovers meant they and all 5000 people had had plenty to eat. And I imagine that they also knew there were plenty of people still in the villages, who couldn't stop their work, or were unable, to come and listen to Jesus along with the crowd. And all those people were probably hungry and probably didn't have leftovers. Jesus had ensured that there was an abundance,

and I'd like to think that the disciples pretty easily handed out the leftovers to those who needed them.

I helped with Vacation Bible School over at the Methodist church on Monday and Tuesday. I was helping Bill Knobles with the Bible story part, and I was there on the days that we had pre-kindergartners, kindergartners, and first graders. Neither Bill nor I are particularly gifted at dealing with little kids, but there we were. We had a script which was more appropriate for older kids. We had some props and decorations which quickly became distractions. And we had a scarcity of energy. We were more than a little apprehensive, and rightly so. The kids were...um...not exactly out of control, but not exactly controlled, either. Everyone stayed in the room. No one got injured. But I seriously, seriously doubted that any of the kids were learning anything about the Bible stories we were supposed to be teaching them. We made it through the first day, more or less intact, but with even less confidence about Tuesday. I can't speak for Bill, but I was thinking to myself, "well, it's just till noon. We can make it." Surviving was the goal, nothing more.

Someone's grandma sat down next to me in the opening gathering time, and with more than a little trepidation, I asked her how her grandson had liked it on Monday. She said, "Well, he didn't say much. But he did say, 'They sure talked a lot about Jesus there.'" That felt like abundance to me. If all this four year old takes away from two days of VBS is "They sure talked a lot about Jesus," that was way better than I had been imagining. Jesus took our little bit of energy, our tiny helping of creativity, our limited stamina and made it abundant. And that little boy shared the leftovers with his grandma.

Despite our tendency to focus on how little we have, how small we are, how helpless we feel, we follow a teacher who creates abundance out of scarcity. If we truly trust in that abundance, then we will have leftovers, plenty of leftovers to share, so that everyone has enough.