

LEFT-OVERS

John 6:1-21
2 Kings 4:42-44

New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches
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Having lived in various parts of this nation, I can say with certainty that there is something common about all churches — they like to gather for meals. Whether those gatherings are called “potlucks,” or “covered dish dinners,” or, as they do in the Midwest, “hot dishes,” the community of faith will gather in the fellowship hall, the social hall, or even outside on the grounds and eat.

Perhaps our texts this morning give us the foundation for gathering together to eat. Both tell of what at first glance, seems like a lot of people to feed. And, secondly, there initially doesn’t appear to be enough provisions for everyone. To some people, even today, this is just a matter of logistics.

I once read about a wedding feast that took place in Tanzania, Africa. The couple was Christian — in fact, the groom’s father was the local bishop of the Lutheran Diocese there; so, you can imagine this was a big to-do. 5,000 people were invited to the wedding and the feast afterward. No, they didn’t serve barley loaves and fish; rather, goat and rice.

The person relating this story went on to wonder how many goats does it take to feed 5,000 people? If, by American standards, one goat might feed 100 people, then 50 goats would be butchered for the event. Yet, the reality turned out to be that only 17 goats were used at this feast!

So often we hear this story of feeding the multitudes and are awed by the miracle. A former professor of mine likes to point out that this story about fishes and loaves is told in each of the four gospel accounts, and that the writer of *Mark* must have really been impressed because he has Jesus do a repeat performance with a gathering of four thousand and only seven baskets of left-overs.

And, that leads me to a question: what happened to the left-overs? The miracle of multiplying five loaves and two fish into a meal to feed thousands is miraculous indeed. But, after gathering up 12 baskets, where did that food go?

Scripture doesn’t tell us. We could speculate. We could extrapolate. And, maybe that is what *John* intends for us to do — to look at what the Bible says about caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan, and look at how our left-overs could be used to help them. And, I daresay, that’s how we look at most missions and ministries in the church. We use our left-overs to fund those activities. But, is that the real point of the story — that we are to give out of what we have extra?

It's easy for us to approach church mission and ministry from the perspective that we have these left-overs, and so we can use them to help others. That's become the American way. Once you've satisfied your own needs, and even most, or some, of your wants and desires, then, with what is left-over, one can "indulge" and give money, time, or whatever is left to help others in need.

But, the rub comes when we look at Scripture and note what happened *before* the baskets of left-overs were collected. Again, we don't know the mechanics of the miraculous feeding. One theory that has always resonated with me is that when Jesus laid out the original 5 loaves and 2 fish and blessed them, others looked in their baskets and satchels, and found their snacks. As Jesus shared His food, probably enough to feed himself and maybe another, so did others, and in the end, "all ate and all were filled." It is out of their abundance that they had 12 baskets of left-overs, but more importantly, they shared what they had to start,

not knowing that it would lead to having anything left.

And, perhaps, that's the message we can take from all this: That God invites us to share what we have in our pockets — whatever funds, time, talent, or gift to be offered to our neighbor without concern whether we have something left-over. In effect, that's the understanding of the line in the Lord's Prayer that asks God for daily bread. The left-overs are God's grace—as we would say in Louisiana — *lagniappe*.

Our focus should be on using what we have for the work of God's Kin-dom. We take the resources at hand and give witness to God's work of love, mercy, and grace. We reach out to others, not because we have some extra time or money, but because we are invited by Jesus, by God Himself, to share what we have.

Delmer Chilton, retired pastor and church consultant, noted that this sharing of resources can't be internal. In using the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, he's said, "From Seattle to Savannah, from Northern New England to Southern California, from high church Episcopalians to low church Quakers, there is one thing all congregations have in common,

they like to eat together. The real difference between them is not...geography or liturgy or theology. The differences have to do with who is invited to eat with them. [C]hurches who vigorously pursued opening the feast to everyone, especially those who took the feast outside the walls into the larger community were healthy. The congregations who were more interested in eating with each other, and who only grudgingly allowed others a seat at the table were dying a slow death."

I believe New Store & Maysville are open to inviting others to the table. But, can we do a better job? Or, are we thinking from the viewpoint that we can do this *if*, and only as, we have left-overs? Are we afraid that what we have is too little? Can we not remember how the disciples and crowds offered up what they had, trusting that God's abundance and blessing would make it enough?

Let us pray: Holy and gracious God, You have given us the heavens and the stars, the mountains and the seas, the fields of grain and the grazing animals. We thank you for the greatest gift of Jesus the Christ, Your Son, our Lord and Savior. Through Him, we are invited to sit in Your presence, to work in Your Kingdom and, in turn, to invite others to join us. We pray that our response to Your love, mercy, and grace comes from all that we have, not merely from the abundance that You make of our offerings, but from the original offering itself, from the essentials that have been provided. Let us start there, and live and work in Your Kingdom, sharing all that we have and all that we are, in Jesus' name. Amen.