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The Seven Miracles of Jesus: 4. Feeding the Thousands

John 6: 10-14, 35

In our earlier reading from John's Gospel about the miracle of feeding thousands with no more than five loaves of bread and two fish we learned that *"When the people had eaten their fill, he said to his disciples, "Gather the leftovers so nothing is wasted. They went to work and filled twelve large baskets with leftovers from the five barley loaves." (vs. 12-13)*

I came across a different type of gathering of food in a broadcast or podcast from National Public Radio this very week that will suit our worship purposes well for this morning. Photographer Peter Menzel and writer Faith D'Aluisio teamed up to publish a book entitled Hungry Planet: What the World Eats. They spent time with 30 different families in 24 countries not only cooking and eating with them, but documenting every vegetable peeled, beverage consumed, and package opened.

At the end of each week they would gather food and drink representing every crumb and ounce these families had consumed and took a portrait photograph of what usually amounted to basketfuls of food. Menzel and D'Aluisio would also provide a breakdown of the categories and the total cost. You'd find such categories as Grains and Starchy Foods, Dairy, Meat, Fish, Eggs, Fruits, Vegetables, Nuts, Beverages, Prepared Food, and so forth. The family with the highest weekly cost was from Germany, two adults and two teenagers with a weekly total of \$500.07. In their photo they were surrounded with a mountain of food...all representing what had been consumed the previous week.

An American family of two adults and two teenagers from North Carolina named the Revises had a grand total of \$341.98. They looked as "normal" as you or me yet you might be surprised to find what categories were the most expensive on their list. Beverages were number one with \$77.75. Fast Food was second coming in at \$71.61. Their portrait in the family kitchen includes boxes of pizzas, bags of potato chips, McDonald's fries and hamburgers, and cases of soft drinks and juices.

Makes one wonder what our baskets of gathered food would look like if we documented every scrap of food and grain of salt used over the course of a week. The two teenage boys in the Revise family were so shocked by what they saw displayed in the kitchen that they made adjustments to their eating habits.

The family with the least expensive food bill was the Aboubakars living in a refugee camp in eastern Chad. In real terms the total cost was \$24.37, but because of subsidies from such organizations as the World Food Program the cost for the family was actually \$1.23. Their

photo shows a mother along with five children from teenagers to a babe in arms sitting on a blanket in front of their tent. The largest item is a burlap bag of a corn-soy blend ration, no dairy products, a mere 9 ounces of goat meat on a bone, and among other items 77 gallons of water used for all purposes...cooking, drinking, cleaning, and bathing.

And Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* (vs. 35) I wonder which of the three families I've mentioned would have a more powerful encounter with those words. John's Gospel has a different purpose behind telling the miracle of feeding the thousands. As we've heard before he was all about using the miracles as a way of establishing the credibility of Jesus as Messiah, but he takes it a step farther in trying to drive home the point that what Jesus did on that hill in Galilee with a few loaves of bread was far greater than what Moses had initiated in the Sinai desert centuries earlier.

Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (vs 31-35)

That historical piece identifying John's purpose for telling the story aside, we'll keep to our Lenten theme of looking at some of the dynamics of the miracles themselves.

The first involves making do with what you have. Five loaves of bread and two fish weren't much to go on but nonetheless the job got done. Sometimes extraordinary things happen with nothing more than the resources we have on hand. I think of the Aboubakars who with very little were able to survive. All of us have those types of moments in our lives yet in the face of what may seem to be insurmountable odds we make do and get through. If we apply that to the miracle ingredients we've identified-- that they have an element of the unexpected, that they change or challenge the laws of nature, that they carry power to assuage our fear--then we may see more than a few "making do with what we have miracles" in our own lives.

There was a story a few days ago about the Stiver family that disappeared more than two weeks ago after leaving for a short trip in an R.V. Driving through the mountains of Oregon to the coast the six took a shortcut instead of taking a well-traveled route and got stuck in four feet of snow. Not planning to be on the road for more than a few hours they had not packed much food. It was a few loaves of bread and two fish situation. They sustained themselves on snow and by stretching the small amount of food they had. After several weeks the snow hardened enough to support their weight so Mr. and Mrs. Stivers, wrapped in blankets, hiked cross country until they found workers from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. By miracle standards they had certainly challenged the rules and laws of nature and making do with what was on hand, they came through.

The other miracle dynamic that may be found in the feeding of thousands story is that of being inspired to share. In his book, *The Active Life* spirituality writer Parker Palmer has a chapter entitled Loaves and Fishes where he offers a possibility about the miracle I find intriguing. In Mark's version of the story Jesus tells his disciples "You give them something to eat." Palmer observes:

He seems to be trying to get the disciples to understand that they have a gift to give the crowd that does not depend on stockpiles of food or commercial transactions. Then the text says that Jesus blessed and broke the five loaves and two fish and had the disciples set them before the people. It does not say that the loaves and fish had magically multiplied by the time they left Jesus' hands. What may have happened instead is that Jesus and his disciples simply modeled the act of sharing for the crowd by giving thanks for what little they had and then offering it to any who wanted to eat.

As this happened, perhaps the people gathered...realized that they, too, had food they could share with one another. Perhaps they found themselves moved to emulate the generosity of Jesus and the disciples rather than hoard their scarce resources. In fact, it might have been hard to do other wise, sitting there on the grass in a circle with family and friends and neighbors, watching this beleaguered little band of Jesus' followers giving away their own meager rations. Suddenly, through a community ignited by an example of generosity, scarcity turns into abundance.

The story does not claim that everyone walked away from the dinner with a full belly. It simply says, 'and they all ate and were satisfied.' Here it seems to me, is a true miracle: that everyone in a group of two or more, let alone five thousand, should end up satisfied." pp. 131-132.

That imagery appeals to me. It marvelously illustrates another of the miracle ingredients we talked about several weeks ago, that sometimes God does his part, and then hopes and waits that we will do ours. When both are in harmony miracles occur. Sixty Minutes correspondent Morley Safer once asked a catholic priest working during a severe famine in a Sudan refugee camp filled with emaciated people and death, "Where is your God now, father?" Barely able to contain his anger, the priest replied, "No, Mr. Safer you have it all wrong. God is weeping and he is asking you and me and all your viewers, 'Where are my children?'"

If the Revise teenage boys from North Carolina were jolted by the amount of food they consumed into changing their diet habits, I wonder if other families felt inspired to share of their abundance just as Parker Palmer imagined the people on the Galilean hillside. That's where your One Great Hour of Sharing insert comes in. If you scan the story inside you'll see how our offering can literally multiply the fishes, a miracle for so many people so far away.

To view family and food portraits from “Hungry Planet: What the World Eats” use the following internet address: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5005952>