

Leftovers
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
February 13, 2022

John 6:1-15, 25-27, 35-40, 48-51

A close friend of mine called to check in with me a few days ago. She asked, "How are you?" It's a common question, one we ask and are asked every day. I replied to her "Fine. I'm doing well. Things are really busy right now. You know, I'm good." She laughed and said, "Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

I suspect I'm not the only one who's had this type of interchange. We might have periods of time when we're busy, getting our work done, meeting deadlines and making commitments, volunteering our time, loving and caring for our families... but there is a difference, a vast difference, between doing life and having life within us.

Doing life or having life; that's an issue Jesus is concerned about. That's the focus of today's gospel. Jesus is talking about more than just the physical or biological manifestations of living.

He's talking about that life that is beyond words, indescribable, and yet somehow we know it when we taste it.

We get a taste of it when we love so deeply and profoundly that everything about us dies, passes away... and yet somehow we are more fully alive than ever before. You know, those moments when everything seems to fit together perfectly and all is right with the world; not because we got our way but because we knew our self to be a part of something larger, more beautiful, and more holy than anything we could have done on our own.

Time stands still and we wish the moment would never end. In that moment we are in the flow, the wonder, and the unity of life, and it tastes good.

Sara Miles was working as a journalist in San Francisco, leading what she describes as "a thoroughly secular life". One early, cloudy morning when she was 46, she walked into a church, ate a piece of bread and took a sip of wine. It was her first communion, and as she tells the story, it was a moment that changed her forever.

Here's what she says in her book "Take This Bread": *"The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but real food - indeed, the bread of life."*

Something led her into the church that day. She now realizes it was hunger. Not physical hunger, mind you. Sara knew how to cook for herself and she could afford to buy food.

But there's hunger and then there's hunger.

Physical hunger brings out the worst in us, doesn't it? In my house (and maybe yours) we use the term "hangry" to describe that crabby anger we feel when we're physically hungry. It's those 15 minutes after your kid comes off the school bus in the afternoon and can't decide upon a snack without whining just a little bit! Panic almost sets in, even though we know we are in no danger of starving.

"Hangry" is what Jesus' followers feel. In John's version of this story, crowds are following Jesus, because he has been performing healing miracles. Jesus sits at the top of a mountain with his disciples, and the people gathered there are pressing in. The crowd is desperate to be near Jesus, to receive healing, and because he's achieved a celebrity status.

The people have been there a while, and now they're getting hungry. Jesus says to Philip, *"What are we going to feed them?"* And Philip panics. *"You're kidding, right Jesus? If we all worked for six months, we wouldn't have enough money to buy food for this huge crowd!"* Another disciple, Andrew says, *"There's a little boy over there with five small loaves of bread and two fish, but what's that among five thousand people?"*

"Tell the people to be seated," Jesus says. They do. The crowd sits down. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it and distributes it along the people. Everyone is fed, and then Jesus says, *"Gather up the leftovers so that nothing is lost,"* and twelve full baskets remain.

The next day the whole region of Galilee is talking about the miracle of the loaves and the fish. Word spreads rapidly, and there are the crowds again, pushing in, getting close, wanting to be near this Jesus who can feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

It's then that Jesus looks at them and says, *"I'm not here to perform miracles. I'm not a magician. I'm here to point you towards God, the one who feeds your deepest hunger. I'm here to show you a way of life that is truly satisfying."*

There is hunger, and there is hunger. Sometimes we realize the difference. There are those days when you grab the first thing you see and put it in your mouth, like a fast-food drive through on your way from one place to another when you're pressed for time. At the end of the day, you think about the junk you ate and how terrible it made you feel.

And then there are other meals, simple ones, perhaps, but prepared with love. There are meals where you don't really notice the food because the conversation was so rich, the time around the table was itself seasoned with joy, compassion and laughter.

There are times when we feel hungry, empty even, and nothing sounds good. You try eating, even something you usually love but that aching, gnawing hunger is still there. So we say things like *"maybe I need to open that second bottle of wine."* or *"Shopping for new clothes might perk me up."* *"I think I need to re-do a room in my house."* Or *"I know, what I really need is a vacation."*

And on and on it goes. We look everywhere, for something to buy, something to do, something to distract us. But if the hunger we feel is a spiritual hunger, only the bread of life will ultimately nourish us.

Something happened to Sara Miles the first time that communion wafer hit her tongue. She started learning about the way of life Jesus taught and lived. She started praying. She was drawn into the life of the community, step by step, deeper and deeper. And one day she received a notice in the mail from the Second Harvest Food Bank of San Francisco. *"We need more neighborhood food pantries,"* the flyer said. And she felt a call, undeniably clear, that her new purpose in life was to start a food pantry at her church.

That was the year 2000. Today (22 years later), every Friday at St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, the food pantry gives away six tons of food to the hungry in the neighborhood. The food is fresh, all are welcome, over a dozen languages are spoken, and - here's the best part - the 400 families served each week are able to "shop" for what they want in an atmosphere of dignity.

And some of the food is distributed right from the altar, from the very spot where Sara herself was first fed.

As you might imagine, not all church members thought that having a food pantry operate out of the sanctuary was a great idea. People were afraid. But Sara said to them, *"This is what you do every week at Communion. You break bread and offer it to strangers. You fed me. I was a stranger. Now I'm going to feed other people."*

Jesus became the bread of life for everyone at her church, St. Gregory's. Some of the volunteers are out of work, some live on the streets. They show up every Friday morning and work for eight or ten hours because they're hungry to give something and connect with other people.

The desire to care for and feed other people is universal. Jesus is the bread of life for everyone. When Jesus feeds us, not only are we satisfied, but there are leftovers, there is more still to share. Because God's love for us is abundant and overflowing.

Can it be that, for those of us who have never really known physical hunger, part of our spiritual hunger will only be satisfied when we are involved in making sure that everyone we know is fed?

In our passage for today, Jesus, the Bread of Life, says to the disciples, *"Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost."* Can you imagine that Jesus says this about the pieces of our lives that feel broken and useless?

I love the idea that in God's world, nothing is wasted. The pieces we want to throw out, the bits that feel broken, the parts that are tired and have lost their shine, the remnants of our lives that we might be ashamed of...

God wants to help us piece them back together.

When we walk the way of life that Jesus taught and lived, when we practice our faith with loving kindness, when we feed the hungry and acknowledge our own hunger, we will realize our deepest needs are being met and we have a reservoir of love to share with those around us.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.