

John 6:1-21 Feeding the 5000

My celebrity crush is an Italian chef named Massimo Bottura. One of the things I like about him is the way he talks about the many dimensions of food, in addition to the merely chemical nutrients that we need. Food is social, food is cultural, food is memory and pleasure, food has implications for justice and for the environment. In 2015, Bottura, whose restaurant has twice been named the best restaurant in the world, began to take seriously the problem of food waste in the restaurant industry. And so it was that he gathered 50 top chefs to open the Refettorio Ambrosiano.

This project combats food waste, social isolation, and food insecurity by serving excellent meals to people living in homelessness, from ingredients that otherwise might have gone to waste. Not just restaurant-quality food, but elegant dishware, live music and table service aim to give each guest a sense of dignity and worth. His non-profit called Food for Soul has since opened 12 similar free restaurants on three continents. It is estimated that they have served 2.4 million hospitality meals, in addition to providing food aid boxes, and have also diverted nearly 2.4 million pounds of food from landfills.

I have no idea what that has to do with today's reading.

It's true that many progressive Christians have sought to rationalize Christianity, that is, to make it rational. And that makes sense. We are people who—I know I'm making a big assumption here—believe in modern medicine, the moon landing, a more or less spherical planet. We want our religion to be rational too.

And so, the interpretation runs, there is an explanation for the gospel lesson. One boy opens his Incredible Hulk lunchbox to share, and the 5000 people gathered on the lawn are thereby inspired to share what they've brought as well. Presto, the crowd is fed. No miracles necessary.

Except if that is all there is to this story, if we want to drain it of its wonder in that way, why does this not happen all the time? Why don't we reach into our respective lunchboxes and share, not just some, but all of what we have?

What are the conditions that would need to be met? Would we not call this a miracle if it happened right now? And for heaven's sake, what could possibly cause 50 fiercely competitive chefs to drop their attitude and collaborate to feed thousands, no, millions? That's gotta be a miracle.

I believe what we're talking about here has something to do with a Jesus-lens of abundance. Everywhere you look in this narrative, there is more than enough, filling up, spilling over. There is even *a great deal* of grass to sit down on. Everyone eats as much as they want. And when they're finished, the disciples have to gather up 12 baskets of bread and fish scraps.

I say *have to*, because gathering up the leftovers is the homework Jesus gives them after the test. You remember the test, when Jesus asks Philip where they're going to buy bread to feed the crowds. Philip takes the accounting pencil from behind his ear and starts to figure the impact on the budget. Well, we'd have to cut down on our youth program and probably stop benevolence giving, but yeah, I guess we can feed these people, Jesus. This one time. Wrong answer. Go back and do the reading again, Philip. This is about abundance.

Now, I venture to say that food scarcity is not really a problem for most of this congregation. Not in your homes, and not at church either. In fact, if you ask people in the community with no other connection to the congregation what they know about us, the answer might have something to do with food. You are good at sharing your bread and your fishes. And just look how that has multiplied!

But is it just maybe possible that scarcity thinking crops up in other ways? When we hold on too tightly to the ways church has been comfortable *for us*. When our focus is trained on what goes on inside the building or to the building and not so much on what goes on outside our doors. How we forge mutual relationships of caring with our neighbors, and not just the ones who occupy the same social strata.

We forget how life abundant is *always* flowing to us and is meant to flow through us.

To be honest, I don't know how it was that 5000 people got fed that day. If maybe Jesus broke bread with his hands and found that as much as he gave away there was always more.... Or if eating the foie gras and crackers I'd been saving, or my delicious PB&J, was suddenly less important than that everyone had something. I don't know and I don't need to know. I'm pretty sure it's not as important that we understand the mystery as it is that we experience the mystery.

What is clear, listening to the disciples, the crowd, all those gathered, is that something transformative has happened here. That ordinary gifts and ordinary people can become the ways God's love is multiplied and passed around, until everyone who is hungry finally has enough to eat. That Jesus sets the table, and bread and wine become a feast. Amen.