

A Midsummer's Night Meal

Matthew 14:13-21

In another month or so, Groton Community Meals will open for service to those who could use a meal, providing nourishment for their bodies and souls. It was originally slated to open tomorrow night, but delays in getting the health department to certify the kitchens involved will make this midsummer night's meal more of an end-of-summer supper.

Shakespeare himself, who liked to make reference to food and drink in his plays, had this advice to share in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

And, most dear actors, eat no onions or garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath...¹

which is a wise point to make for both kitchen staff and table company. Of course, the point of a meal is not just to fill one's gullet (which obviously is the reward for being in attendance), but rather to enjoy the people with whom one dines. This will be a well-appreciated gift for a number of Groton residents, particularly those who struggle to make ends meet.

Our church moderator, Chris Butta, has been instrumental in this newly reinvigorated effort to provide a daily meal in our community. She has been a part of a planning committee that has worked over the last several months to put this into good order. They have identified two locations for these meals: three Mondays a month at St. John's Christian Church across from Branford Manor, and twice a month (also on Mondays) at Faith Lutheran Church on Poquonnock

¹ Act 4, Scene 2.

Avenue (this will complement what's already being done in Groton on some other days of the week). Our church is being asked to step up and not only contribute funds for the operations, but to recruit volunteers to help prepare and serve the meals. I hope some of us are willing to donate a bit of our time for this effort come the fall.

I suppose, this is the type of mission that's easy to support but less to participate in. People have busy lives and many find it easier to help pass the plate in the church sanctuary than serve at a soup kitchen. We do that mainly because we endorse the idea of charity, but we may be less interested in actually engaging the people who will gather there.

This is a common phenomenon. In general, people don't like to view themselves as class conscious, but as a society we are very much so. It might not be evident in any formal way, such as would have been the case in the old aristocratic world of ages past, but it is noticeable in how difficult it is to recruit middle and upper class volunteers to work alongside those in lower income settings. The comfort level isn't there and making a small financial contribution becomes the convenient way to avoid any direct involvement and responsibility. I don't mean to be harsh about this, only honest.

However, in my experience, it's the personal, direct engagement that really makes an impact, not only on those who are recipients of someone else's charity, but particularly on those who are giving their time to help another. When we are able to get acquainted with someone who we would not otherwise know (given our respective social locations)—when we are able to humanize a type of person of whom we only have a caricature based on clichés, a mental and

emotional transformation occurs. The natural and cultivated stereotypes each have about the other are challenged, deconstructed, and sometimes eliminated altogether. It's the power of people-to-people exchanges that transform the human heart from one of easy caricatures and justifications for all sorts of uncharitable opinions to one where stories and conversations educate us on the circumstances of the other. We discover an underlying reality we thought we already grasped, but actually didn't. Empathy for the other begins to break down "the dividing wall of hostility" (to borrow a phrase from Ephesians).

So let me put it this way: do yourself a favor, sign up to help, and give them something to eat. *You* give them something to eat—not somebody else, not some other church member or volunteer. You, personally and collectively, give these people something to eat once this community meal opens for service in September!

I acknowledge some of you may immediately tune me out—one or two might even be indignant and put off by my insistence, explaining that you're already too busy or not interested. Who am I to use the power of the pulpit to try to guilt you into doing something you wouldn't want to do on your own? I recognize that; we're all busy people. We all pick and choose what we'll do with our available time. No coercion from the pulpit is warranted.

Except whatever pushiness sensed from me isn't coming from my own personal moralizing. It's a direct quote from this text I just read, i.e., the story of the feeding of the multitude. In all fairness, I'm being easy on us, in contrast to Jesus who was a bit more forceful and insistent when the disciples came up to him in the moment and

suggested that he dismiss the crowds so they could address their bodily needs and growling stomachs. *Be considerate Jesus, so they can find some relief from their hunger! You may feed their souls, but their bodies are famished!*

In my view, the most provocative aspect to this biblical story isn't the mystery over how thousands of people were fed that day; that was the easy part, once things got organized and started. The steepest challenge facing the disciples in that moment was when Jesus declared to them in no uncertain terms: "You give them something to eat!" If you were a bit uncomfortable a moment ago when I pointed in your direction said the same thing to you, can you imagine how Peter, Mary, and John felt when, out in the wilderness, Jesus took the individual responsibility that was expected of each person there for taking care of their own needs, but placed the collective responsibility upon the disciples: "You give them something to eat!" Don't send them away—"they need not go away; you give them something to eat!" You do it! You take on that task!

What happened, of course, is what occurs whenever the request for volunteers goes out for an overwhelming assignment not of their choosing. They balked! The disciples individually and collectively resisted taking on that responsibility, because it was too much to ask. *How in the world can we feed the hungry? There's so many of them! We haven't the time, the resources, the means; besides we don't even know these people! I'm only responsible for my own household, not someone else's, especially those who don't take responsibility for their own lives.* Of course, we've been hearing this for thousands of years.

As if to prove their point, Andrew, Martha, and James rummaged through their own satchels and could only come up with five loaves and two fish—about what a small family might consume for their midsummer night’s meal (cf. John’s Gospel makes it about one small boy offering up his lunch). That was hardly sufficient to feed a crowd of thousands. *Send them away, before a riot breaks out for what little we have—before you ruin your reputation promising more than you can deliver!*

Scarcity is one of the great excuses of humankind. Our economy operates on this premise—it’s ingrained in us. We don’t have enough; there’s not enough to go around. There’s too short a supply. *The value of fish and bread just skyrocketed in this shrinking economy, so skip the handouts and let those who can afford the market price step forward!* In fact, let’s figure that the available resources can be accessed by those who have enough money to prepare for lean times.

People who are responsible plan for scarce times; it’s a mean world, but there’s a reason Darwin noted the character of species evolution with the survival of the fittest! It’s one thing to be generous with our charity when times are flush, but when there’s not enough to go around, then everyone’s on their own and let the chips fall where they do! It’s the prudent thing to do. Besides, if God wanted us all to enjoy fish and bread, they’d be growing on trees, available to everyone—not hidden away in our private satchels!

But, friends, Jesus didn’t live in a world of scarcity, nor do we. He told the reticent ones to hand over the foodstuffs—all the snacks

they had tucked in their bags—and after giving thanks to God for five loaves and two fish, he began to break them and share them.

In Mark's Gospel, we get the important detail that Jesus first organized the large crowd into smaller circles of fifties and hundreds, personalizing the relationships between those who were there. That's an important part. Not even Jesus could alleviate world hunger, but with a little organization, he could alleviate hunger in the world, as can we. When people began to notice Jesus sharing the loaves and fishes among his small community of disciples, they followed suit and suddenly other loaves, fish, figs, olives, perhaps a little wine, all came out of the satchels people were carrying. Shared food became a sufficient supply for all.

We'd like to believe that the miracle was Jesus' supernatural power to produce more food than Monsanto; but the truth is, the miracle occurred when a large city turned into hundreds of smaller villages and communities of personal relationships—people to people exchanges—sharing what they had with each other. Not only was everyone fed, they ended up with plenty of leftovers!

Friends, I'm convinced the reason this one story is repeated in all four of the Gospels—a rarity in the biblical record—is because it was transformational; it illustrated so well what Jesus' ministry and teachings were about. The Gospel isn't the old Roman mythological notion of *Deus ex machina*, or waiting until God enters into the world to save it, as much as it was the presence of God inspiring people to help save the world they lived in. The feeding of the multitude was a “crossing the threshold” moment of understanding of that. The only way that Jesus could legitimately announce the reign of God coming

to earth was if it was fulfilling the prophetic dreams of mercy and justice—

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61)

This focus on freeing people from the things which enslave them in life and by taking care of the least of these in their greatest needs is the means by which the world is transformed and reformed into the type of community care that God promises and Jesus inaugurated. This is what the Gospel is! The change of heart doesn't come by government social programs for all the good they may do, but by the changed hearts of those who have more toward those who have less. It's a relational transformation—a spiritual transformation—the type of change in outlook and attitude that comes about when you engage your poorer neighbor in their setting, where all of their disadvantages and obstacles to solutions in life become abundantly clear. It's a change of heart for those who have become heartless.

Matthew made this stunningly clear in the parable that declares the great criteria of faith:

...for I was hungry and you gave me food to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. (Matthew 25:35-36)

That's the essence of the Gospel: the uniting of people across class, race, social location, nationality, economic status, politics, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, marital status, heritage,

language, and every other human distinction, by bringing us together in an empathetic and community spirit of caring and sharing. What we discover from our neighbor when we cross the threshold into their world is: *If you learn my story, then I'm no longer a stereotype.*

Breaking bread and sharing stories is what a midsummer night's meal is meant for, not only among friends and family, but with those who are new to us and often emotionally and morally distant from us. But if you want to find Jesus in your heart, that's where you start looking—into the hardpack faces of those who live difficult lives—impossible lives, into the eyes of children too young to know how cruel and callous people can be, and into the stories of those who share more in common with you and me than we dare admit.

If Groton Community Meals is where you may find Christ, then respond to his command to you: *You give them something to eat!* For I promise, you will also find food there for yourself—a meal that will nourish your body and an experience that will satisfy your soul.

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