

Proper 12B
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Giving Thanks for Leftovers

I was always a proud member of the clean plate club when I spent the night at my grandmother's house. My grandmother despised wastefulness, particularly wastefulness of food. She wanted the plates to be empty when she cleared the dinner table. Leftovers rarely appeared in her refrigerator. She had devised the clean plate club as a way to insure that my brothers and I would eat everything on our plates. Well, my brothers tried to get around this: the food in the napkin trick, giving the dog scraps under the table, even begging big sis to eat the dreaded peas. Since I was never picky and actually liked my vegetables, I received much praise at my grandmother's dinner table. My grandmother was a woman of frugality- wastefulness was frowned upon. I never asked her from where she got her frugal nature. I suspect that her experience as a child during the Great Depression shaped her in this way.

Our Gospel passage today is the great tale of leftovers. However, these leftovers are not seen as a sign of wastefulness, but of God's great abundance even in the midst of scarcity. The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is one of the few stories that is told by all four gospels-revealing its significance to those first eyewitness accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus decides he needs to get away for awhile- to catch his breath and pray. With his disciples in tow he heads toward the nearest mountain; when suddenly he is compelled to change his course. A crowd of weary people hungering for relief and hope have found their way to him. There, on the mountainside by the Sea of Galilee Jesus decides to break bread with this massive crowd. He plops down in the grass and says to the

disciples, "We're going to have a picnic lunch and everyone is invited." Jesus, the eternal optimist, sees the possibility, the opportunity in every situation. The disciples, however, look at things in a very different way. Philip, the realist, says they'd need more than six months worth of paychecks to feed all these people. This is not possible. Andrew tries to imagine something else. Let's see if we can get folks to give us their food. However, he's not very successful in his endeavor. One little boy gives him a meager five loaves and two fish. Now Andrew gets discouraged. It's just not possible. There is not enough.

Then, as what often occurs in Jesus' presence, we are surprised. Jesus takes the little boy's offering and from what seems scarcely possible, creates a meal for all those gathered, a picnic with enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. A blogger I read this week made this comment on the miracle: "Jesus turns the notion of 'never enough' on its head. Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine without a job, a home, or a 401K. Jesus slept under the stars, and he wandered alone and hungry in the wilderness. Jesus was faced with a world full of hurt and brokenness, surrounded by those who reached out desperately to touch him.

So when Jesus tells us that there is enough, no that there is *more* than enough, I want you to understand where he stood when he spoke those words. Poor, persecuted, and homeless Jesus tells us not only is there enough, there is abundance. Jesus and his disciples and the crowd find themselves in a place of scarcity, in the wilderness without food or accommodation. Fear and anxiety overcome them. Jesus tells them to sit down as if at a banquet and low and behold not only is there enough after all, there is more than enough."

We live in a world a world not unlike the one Jesus encountered: one full of hurt and brokenness, one where people are desperate for relief and hope. After all, we find ourselves as a nation in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. People continue to lose their jobs at an alarming rate. Homes are still being foreclosed. Our reliable banking system seems no longer safe and secure. I have never experienced anything like this in my own lifetime. I know that for many of you the pain is hitting too close to home. It is a scary time. It would be easy for us to get caught up in the trap of scarcity, to think there will never be enough.

And yet, I see this time we live in ripe with opportunity. In fact, the Chinese word for crisis means opportunity. I believe that in the midst of the hurt and fear, it is an opportunity for us to be reminded of what really matters in life: the joys of family and friends, the support of a faith community, and the promise that Jesus does not ignore our hurts or our brokenness. He has come to bring us relief and hope. He has come to take away our fear, our loneliness and our hunger by walking the very same road with us.

It is also, I believe an opportunity for us to be reminded that our worldly success does not define who we are. Our worthiness in God's eyes has nothing to do with our job title or how much money we make or how big our house is. All that we are and all that we have is a precious gift from God. We have much within us to offer to our hurting world -to share our own gift of abundance with others who find themselves hungry, as well. In Jesus, we come to experience that with God all things are possible. Even in a place of scarcity, Jesus tells us there is not only enough, but there is abundance. Twelve baskets of leftovers are there to prove it!

It could be very easy for us to dwell in that place of scarcity, to see our future lives, our community and even our faith through the lens of fear and despair. It could be very easy for us to say to ourselves and to one another, "This isn't possible. There simply is not enough." Yet, Jesus tells us again and again as he did his first disciples to sit down and join him in the feast, to watch and believe, to rediscover for ourselves and our community the gift of His extravagant abundance. If we are willing to do so, look and behold we may find among ourselves baskets and baskets full of leftovers.