

The parish where I served before coming to Grace Cathedral, St. Peter's in Port Chester, New York, was always overflowing with food. Literally. Feeding people was in this community's DNA: they hosted a soup kitchen 13 times a week, feeding thousands of people; area grocery stores dropped off endless crates of food donations for passersby to rifle through on the lawn; and there was almost always someone cooking up something delicious in the kitchen. Every Thanksgiving, we gave away 200 turkeys. One day, someone we'd never seen before knocked on the door in the pouring rain and, without explanation, dropped off 1000 bagels. The quantity of food that was served and eaten on any given day was staggering and, even on the days when the soup kitchen volunteers were forced to forage through the pantry and scrounge up a meal out of whatever odds and ends they could find, there was always more than enough to go around. Most days, I was sent home from work laden down with food that, no matter how hard I tried to refuse, I couldn't: steaming styrofoam containers of soup kitchen leftovers, whole chickens that wouldn't fit in the freezer, heaps of produce leftover at the end of the day that otherwise would have gone to waste. I rarely brought a lunch to work and could go weeks without needing to grocery shop.

Prior to serving that community, I might have told you that the Biblical feeding of the thousands was an improbable or perhaps exaggerated miracle, but now? I believe it because I have seen it, over and over again. I believe because I have experienced miraculous, divine abundance in my own body and tasted its sweetness. Feasting in a community scarred by food insecurity. Generosity flowing out of real and urgent poverty. Abundance *overflowing* despite fears of scarcity and without calculating the cost. Community being built while organizing canned goods, chopping onions, and ladling out big scoops of spaghetti.

These feeding miracles, where Jesús and his disciples find themselves in the midst of an enormous, hungry crowd and turn a preposterously small quantity of bread and fish into a lavish feast, appear in slightly different forms in all four Gospels. In every case, the disciples balk and scoff at Jesús' command to feed the crowds with so little food. These stories speak to a universal, hard-wired human fear that runs deep in all of us: a fear that there will not be enough. Not enough food, not enough money, not enough jobs.

But the fear goes deeper than panic over a lack of material things. Underneath all of those very real and very practical fears, there's an undercurrent of terror, a demonic voice that plants a seed of suspicion in our hearts that there's not enough love to go around. Not enough attention. Not enough respect and recognition. That fear, when it runs unchecked, drives us to compete for resources, even when they are abundant. To hoard and stockpile, to bolster our sense of security however we can. That fear makes us defensive and anxious. When we are in its grip, we fail to recognize the abundance of what we really have - and the even greater abundance that would be possible if we opened our hands instead of clenching our fists.

When we read these stories about the feeding of thousands, it's easy to get caught up in the technicalities, proposing theories for *how exactly* Jesús was able to make this tiny amount of bread and fish last for so many people. Maybe everyone ate only a tiny crumb. Maybe the people in the crowd were inspired by Jesús' generosity and added their own little bits of food to the basket as it passed them. Maybe a lot of things. We really don't know.

But I venture to say that, when we overanalyze the miracle, we're missing the point. This story exists, not as a how-to guide for hosting a massive picnic with limited resources, but as a challenge to all the ways we have convinced ourselves that there is not enough to go around - or that we are powerless to change the status quo. Where we have bought into a false narrative of

scarcity, the story of the loaves and fishes is a powerful counter-witness to God's outrageous abundance. Where we feel paralyzed by overwhelm at the tasks that face us, the Gospel reminds us that small actions, undertaken with great love, can cause a cascade effect, bringing healing and nourishment to thousands, without regard for our limited sense of what should be possible.

We all have our own loaves and fishes stories. They might not have anything to do with bread or seafood, it's true. But we all have had moments in our lives when we got more than we thought we deserved, or when something was easier than we expected, or when there was, in fact, more than enough food to feed all our guests. Moments when God challenged our fear of there never being enough and gave us a glimpse of that heavenly abundance that God always dreams of bringing into reality on earth. I invite you to take a moment and reflect - where are those loaves and fishes stories in your lives? Those moments that are beacons of grace in times of struggle, signposts in the wilderness of our fear, and nourishment to keep going forward on our own journey with God? Where have we encountered abundance beyond our wildest imagination? How has it transformed us?

The key to understanding the miracle of the loaves and fishes isn't actually in the Gospel story at all. It's in one extraordinary verse from the letter to the Ephesians that, not by accident, the lectionary pairs with this story from John's Gospel. It's a verse that, if you've ever attended Evensong or prayed evening prayer, might be familiar to you because it's one of the options for closing our common worship: "Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." *Repeat.*

It's one of my favorite Bible verses of all time. It reminds us that, while all power is God's, we are the vessels. God doesn't act in a vacuum. God works *through us*. Through our hands and hearts and words. Through our fragile and imperfect human bodies, God is able to turn

a bread crust and a few fish into a feast for countless thousands. Through us, even through our fear and doubt, God is able, not just to exceed our expectations, but to do *infinitely more* than we can ask or imagine. Grace upon grace.

In my own experience, the miracles of abundance that God works through our human bodies usually aren't especially glamorous. They tend to involve things like unloading 70 pallets of canned goods in 90 degree heat, washing towering stacks of crusty serving dishes, or figuring out how many favors to call in to keep 200 turkeys frozen when they unexpectedly get delivered a week before Thanksgiving. I don't imagine the Biblical feeding of the thousands as a serene, peaceful picnic - I imagine it more like the average soup kitchen line, with people squabbling over who was there first, trying to cut the line, and complaining that, actually, they don't really like bread and fish and would like an alternative option please. We don't do ourselves any favors when we romanticize this story. Miracles can be gritty and embodied and human and still be miraculous.

The question becomes - as people who have received such abundance, who have seen and heard and tasted this grace beyond measure, how will we live differently? Will we let these experiences of grace start to change our story, start to challenge and calm our deep seated fears that there isn't enough? Can we begin to trust in God's abundance and relinquish our death grip on those things we think will keep us safe and secure? Can we begin to share our own loaves and fishes without fretting over how far they will go or how much we will have left for ourselves? Can we trust that we have enough? Can we trust that we are enough?

Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesús forever and ever. Amen.