

An Intimate Dinner Party for Five Thousand
Isaiah 58:6-9; Mark 6:30-44
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Ordination of Sarah Segal McCaslin
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As one of Sarah's pastors during her high school and college years, I am very honored to be part of this ordination and installation service as Sarah becomes a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). When Sarah told me the passages of scripture she had chosen for this occasion, I was not surprised. These texts are marked by equal measures of justice and compassion, values Sarah embraces in her own life and ministry. And these texts are also about something basic to life and well-being: food. In the church where Sarah grew up and was formed in faith, food was an integral practice of our common life.

An urban congregation, Central Presbyterian Church houses a Night Shelter, now almost 30 years in operation, where every night from November through March, 70 homeless men are fed a sit-down dinner prepared by volunteers. Every day of the year, 50 or more people come to the Outreach and Advocacy Center for counseling and referrals, for public transportation tokens, for food items to tide them over when their food stamps have run out, or for a ready cup of coffee and a doughnut. In addition to these Outreach Ministries, food was integral to other parts of our regular life as a congregation. Because members there, like members at this great church, come from many directions and distances to worship and serve together, Central serves lunch every Sunday after worship. The food is great and the noise level is high as people catch up and break bread together in crowded rows of tables. And then there is another table, the communion table, where once a month, the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

We come by this emphasis naturally. Stories about food abound in all of scripture, and the gospels are no exception. Jesus is often pictured eating with his disciples and with those "outcasts and sinners" he seemed to be particularly fond of. This miracle of the feeding of the five thousand must have been very important to the early church, for it appears in all four gospels. Mark and Matthew even tell a second version of it a few chapters later when Jesus feeds a slightly smaller party of four thousand!

As centuries lengthened and miracles shortened, Christians seemed to grow uneasy with stories like this one. People began to look for some rational explanation for how Jesus fed five—or even four—thousand with only a few loaves and some fish. One interpretation, especially in the version of this story that has a young boy sharing his lunch, suggests that when the crowd saw the boy’s generosity, they were moved to bring out their own hidden picnic baskets and share with those who had no food. A second explanation was that each person really took only a fraction of food and so was satisfied in a spiritual, not a physical, sense.

There...a manageable miracle! But to spiritualize this story about physical hunger is to trivialize it. A symbolic meal is not as satisfying as a feast when one is really hungry. Every Communion Sunday growing up, Sarah heard Ted Wardlaw’s instructions to the congregation before the Lord’s Supper. He always told everyone that when they came forward, they were not to pinch off a tiny piece of bread barely big enough to dip in the chalice without getting purple fingertips. No, he said every time, take a big piece of bread. There will be enough because God’s grace is as big and generous as that... From my observations, the only people who took him seriously were the children, who know there is indeed a difference between being “spiritually” satisfied and physically satisfied. Adults still tore off a polite pinch, while the children reached in and pulled out a hunk of bread, sure that what the pastor said about enough bread was true. I believe that somewhere inside they were also learning to trust that God’s grace really might be as big and generous as that loaf of communion bread.

The Old Testament passage Sarah chose for today strongly refuses to let us get by with mere “symbolic” discipleship. When Isaiah spoke these pointed words to the congregation of Israel, he saw a people who delighted in worshipping God with great piety in the Temple. But as soon as they shook the preacher’s hand and went out the door, they went right on oppressing their neighbors for their own gain. So Isaiah told Israel that the only true worship of God involved justice in regard to the basics of life: share your bread; give shelter to the homeless; and clothe the naked. That’s real food, real housing, real clothes for people who did not have enough of these basic necessities. How faithfully we share these tangible resources has a lot to say about our “spiritual” condition. As my Columbia Seminary colleague Walter Brueggemann puts it, “The God of Judaism is not a God who likes to be flattered in a passive routine of worship; this God is out working the neighborhood and wants all adherents doing the same.”¹

You may be wondering about now what all of this has to do with Sarah's ordination today. Well, for one thing, these passages remind us that ministry, however focused on Word and Sacrament, inevitably leads Sarah and all of us as disciples into tangible acts of justice and compassion toward neighbors, especially the ones most vulnerable and most excluded by society *and* by the church. I'll tell you now that Sarah has been called to be out 'working the neighborhood' with the God who has called her and gifted her for ministry. These passages are about real human need and how ministry in Jesus' name calls on us to respond to those needs, physical *and* spiritual, presented to us.

Of course, trying to meet the needs of one congregation, let alone a whole world of need, is an impossible, even insensitive demand from God, isn't it? Even Jesus' best disciples and some Presbyterian pastors can feel overwhelmed or inadequate to the task. Sarah, let's just name it here at beginning: Sometimes ministry is going to feel like being asked to throw an intimate dinner party for five thousand!

I love this story in Mark. The disciples had just come back from a successful preaching/teaching/healing tour. They really had this ministry thing down! Pumped up and exhausted all at once, Jesus pulls them away to a deserted place to rest. As Sarah rightly told me in an email, she loves the intimacy and the care expressed in those opening verses. But that intimacy quickly gets lost in a crowd, because when they got to that "deserted place," five thousand people were waiting for them. Jesus had compassion on them, too, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, so he began teaching them. When it got late, the disciples tugged on his sleeve and said, "Um, Jesus. We are out in the middle of nowhere. There is not a restaurant or even a 7/11 in sight. You better send them on so they can find a village and get themselves something to eat." That's when Jesus says it: "You give them something to eat." And suddenly his disciples aren't feeling the love or a shred of compassion for their fatigue. Oh, like we have that kind of money to suddenly cater a banquet! Yes, sometimes ministry is like being asked to throw an intimate dinner party for five thousand...and you just don't have what it is going to take...

One May in the church I served in Asheville, we had four deaths in three weeks. I was exhausted and sad the day I was preparing my fourth funeral sermon when a wonderful couple from the congregation came by my study. They brought me a basket. A cut-out red construction paper heart was tied to it bearing these words: “Survival Kit for the Pastor of Grace Covenant.” Inside the basket were emergency supplies like a pair of pantyhose if I ever got a run in mine and needed a quick-change. Deodorant. And make-up. But there were other gifts with more than their surface meaning. A pair of Dr. Scholl’s cushion insoles for all the walking I had to do. Vitamins. Aspirin—lots of aspirin! Band-aids. Antacids. And earplugs. We had a good laugh and I held onto that basket for the truth and the encouragement it contained. It got me through that hard, sad day and that basket has been a reminder through other demanding, exhausting, exhilarating days since.

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus said. I’ve often replied that I don’t have enough. Enough money, enough bread, enough fish, enough time, enough—or the right—words. But Jesus stays on it, “Well, what do you have?” Five loaves and two fish. That’s it. And there are five thousand of them. “Start with that,” Jesus continues. So you as a pastor, or you as a disciple, or you as a congregation start with what you have. You give some of your money, bring in a few bags of canned goods, open up part of your building, pray this much of a prayer, write that much of a sermon... Place what you have in Christ’s hands, then blessed and broken open by him, by God’s big and generous grace, what you have to offer is somehow enough. Miracle, over and over again.

Sarah, when you asked me to preach for your ordination, you told me that as you are finding your own voice, you remembered my voice as a woman in ministry. I was honored and surprised. Today what we celebrate is the voice with which you begin ordained ministry in the church. Start with what you have. It is enough. Your first two sermons as their Associate Pastor have stressed ecumenism and inclusion in the church. Keep preaching, sister! Yes, you will find that over the years your voice will change and grow and deepen as you change and grow and deepen. Speaking as a 49-year-old woman pastor, I hope that you will always be finding your voice in ministry with others. But right now, today, our denomination needs to hear what your mature young voice has to say. And keep showing us how true worship inevitably leads us to tangible acts of justice and compassion.

There will be times when you feel exhilarated by ministry, in ministry. And there will be times when you feel exhausted. That's how the disciples felt that day in the wilderness. Yet their five loaves and two fish filled everyone, as manna had done in another wilderness centuries before when it seemed that there would not be food enough. Only this time, the story ends a bit differently. Manna, you remember, was only good for the day it appeared...no leftovers, except once a week before the Sabbath. But here in the gospel wilderness with Jesus, the miracle is not quite over yet. After the meal, they took up twelve baskets of leftovers...one for each exhausted disciple. Do you see? The intimacy and compassion with which the story began returns.

Sarah—and Jon and Barbara—with this congregation in ministry, may you receive baskets filled over and over again. Filled with the basic necessities of life, like food, shelter and clothing to share. And baskets filled with compassion and justice and humor and God's great big, generous grace, to share, too. Just the miracle needed, and given, for the insensitive, impossible, exhilarating, and beautiful demands of ministry in the name of the One who looks at each one of us and says, "You give them something to eat."

Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah 40-66, Westminster Bible Companion. Westminster John Knox Press, 189.