

August 16, 2015

“Love People – Provide Them with Good Food”

Sermon by Rev. Gayle Pickrell

Scripture: 2 Kings 4:42-44

John 6: 1-14

2 Kings 4:42-44

⁴²A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” ⁴³But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’” ⁴⁴He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

John 6:1-14

⁶After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

I’m not an advertising agent for Penzeys Spices, but I love their motto:

Love People – Cook Them Tasty Food

When you buy some of their spices, you may get a bumper sticker with those words. I put my sticker on our refrigerator door. When my 1 ½ year old granddaughter was here from Japan, she pulled it off, and then we re-stuck it to the refrigerator. I could have gotten a new sticker, but I left the crumbled one there as a reminder of how her, since I rarely get to see her. So it reminds me of love.

I do enjoy cooking, and my favorite times are when family or friends are sitting around the table enjoying the food I've prepared. It's not just the food – it's the love that is represented around the table, the conversation that occurs, and the memories that are created.

I cannot imagine living in a situation where there is not enough food. But I know for many, their refrigerator, (*if they have one,*) may not be as well stocked as mine; their cupboards may be much more bare, whereas mine bulge with food products. Many people love shopping for clothes or shoes or jewelry. I love going to the grocery store or Costco!

Love people – cook/provide them with good food.

We had the 10-year Anniversary Celebration of Elisha's Pantry two weeks ago.
(*Showed some slides from the event.*)

We had a program with several speakers: David Goodman, (Director of Redwood Empire Food Bank), Susan Gorin (County Board of Supervisors), and Julie Combs (City Council member). Julie Combs presented us with a City Resolution, commending us for our good work. Susan Gorin's office asked me to send more than just details about the Pantry, since they want to present us with a County Gold Resolution. I wrote these words to Susan Gorin's office.

It's not only to meet a need "out there." People hunger, not just for food, but to help make a difference in our world. There is so much need, and we often feel so helpless. Providing good, nutritional food to people who are food-challenged is only a drop in a wide ocean to help meet the need, but it is one small part that we can do. People tend to give of their time and monetary resources when they have a first-hand relationship to the mission. When you meet someone who has been homeless, they are no longer a faceless number. When you see a mother picking up food for 6 people in her family, you know they have already stretched their food budget to the max. When you see children who have had too much cheap junk food, we are happy we can help fill their stomachs with wholesome food and fresh fruits and vegetables. The organic produce that we receive each week from the Harvest for the Hungry Garden (also on the Christ Church property) is a big hit, including kale, Swiss chard and other greens not always high on the "wanted" list. Bauman College's food demonstrations several years ago helped create a demand for these high nutritional greens. The lettuce, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, carrots, beets, onion, peppers, beans and other produce from the garden make a colorful and nutritional display and are quickly picked up by our guests.

The clients also love the bread and especially the pastry selections donated by Whole Foods and Boudin Bakery. They also receive several canned food items, plus beans, rice, pasta, and refrigerated or freezer items we purchase at Redwood Empire Food Bank. We have recently started giving out fresh eggs.

Elisha's Pantry is special because of the quality of food, the kindness of the volunteers, the bonds created between people, and the appreciation expressed by the clients. Every week, people express their gratitude to the generosity of the pantry, saying it makes a big difference for them.

(*Showed pictures of the building of the pantry.*)

When we started Elisha's Pantry 10 years ago, it was a leap of faith. We were a small congregation; we were on a tight budget; we weren't sure if we could come up with the money or the volunteers needed not only to build the pantry from ground up, to contribute the \$3000 each year required from each of the 3

congregations. But just as in the biblical stories of generosity, we have been blessed with plenty of food, as well as volunteers and monetary resources to keep it going. Our tables are loaded with fresh produce from the Harvest for the Hungry Garden, or the Redwood Empire Food Bank. Whole Foods and Boudin Bakery gives us leftover bread and pastry items. And with many other contributions, our clients leave the pantry loaded with good, healthy food.

When we started the pantry, we had several options for the name. In the end, we chose the title “**Elisha’s Pantry**” because of the Judeo-Christian roots, recalling the miracle and generosity of God as told in the stories of 2 Kings 4 and John 6.

In today’s reading, an unnamed man brings “food from the first fruits.” We don’t know if this man was a follower of Elisha. We don’t know if there really was a famine during this time and Elisha was in fact in need of food. But we do know that pious Israelites often felt the obligation to provide for the priests from the first harvest. The offering of "first fruits" acknowledged that the land and its produce belonged first of all to God. (*When we tithe and give from our resources, we are again acknowledging that all that we have belongs first of all to God.*) I would imagine it would be as hard for people then who had so little to actually give away their first harvest as an act of generosity and thankfulness. It begins as miracle – miracle of generosity and abundance in the midst of scarcity.

“Twenty loaves of barley.” Can you imagine the amount of work it required to produce 20 loaves? Someone had to harvest the grain – and remember, this is before machinery that could tackle the job easily. And then someone had to grind the grain, carry the water, mix the ingredients, and then bake those barley loaves over a fire? Remember, everything was done by hand-- no Cuisinarts, gas stoves or microwaves. Then to offer 20 loaves as gift was remarkable.

Elisha could have hoarded the food for himself, but instead he asked his servant to set it out for the hundred people that had gathered. Elisha made it clear that the loaves were to be shared with everyone –it was a matter of equity. Selfishness and greed are never part of God’s plan. Not only were all served, there was food left over. God’s plan is for generosity and abundance.

God overrides scarcity with abundance.

(A quote from Walter Brueggeman, one of my favorite Old Testament scholar/author/lecturer.)

Truly this is a miracle story.

- it is a miracle of sharing by an anonymous giver
- it is a miracle that the recipient (Elisha) decided to share instead of save it all for himself
- it is a miracle the all were part of the sharing, not just a privileged few – there was equality and community being established and it was a miracle about God’s abundance and provision

(Pictures of the Rummage Sale)

I think of the Rummage Sale as a visual example of the multiplying of loaves and fishes, or in this case, of used goods and more stuff! We sold \$10,000+ worth of items last Saturday, and still filled the Nursery School room and side walls with all that was left over! As many people said last Sunday, it is actually an important ministry of our church. There was lots of laughter and sharing and community-building during the two week preparation time; and the things we sold mostly went to people who could not have afforded to pay the market rate for many of those items. It is a ministry of outreach to the community beyond the walls of this building. And for the most part, people seemed appreciative of our kindness and organization. (Next time the PD lists “best” things of Sonoma County, we should ask them to add a category: Best Rummage Sale – we’d win, I’m sure of it!

How many times have we seen acts of generosity and kindness in the midst of a horrible situation? Floods, fires, earthquakes – the natural elements have wracked havoc on many places in our country this last year. Whole communities have been left with tremendous loss and displacement, fear and uncertainty.

As one person from Minnesota commented about the flood in her area last year:

The miracle was in the generosity and the sharing: people from near and far teamed up in sandbagging, plugging, pumping, monitoring, organizing, feeding and comforting. Friends and strangers from across the country and around the globe witnessed to God's abundance through their prayers and encouragement. The first fruits and service owed to God were given to the people of the Red River Valley. It was, indeed, a holy offering.

There are so many stories of generosity right here, as well.

(pictures of our own people involved in community/global outreach)

God continues to override scarcity with abundance.

All four Gospels have similar stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes, sometimes 4000 people, sometimes 5000. The story in John is the only one where it is mentioned that it is a boy with the barley loaves and fish. But in all the stories, there were obviously more people than the disciples could care for.

What to do? There wasn't a KFC nearby to go pick up buckets of chicken and biscuits. Nor was it realistic for Jesus to tell the crowd that he and his disciples were going on their lunch hour and the people would have to go away and come back later. Instead, they found a boy who had food and asked him to share.

A miracle story indeed. It was a miracle

- that it was a young person who gave what he had
(children were usually not recognized in that time period as having any worth, much less become the hero of the story)
- that he shared at all
(I have a 2-year-old granddaughter, and the word "mine" is her favorite word.
We have to learn to share.)
- the crowd was asked to sit down in groups –they formed community
When you sit with another person and get to know them, there is a much greater tendency toward generosity and sharing rather than considering them strangers and feeling no responsibility
- there was equity because no one was more privileged than another – all were invited to share
- and, that after all were satisfied, the disciples gathered up the left over fragments so that nothing was lost, and they filled twelve baskets.

The number 12 was an important symbolic number in our scriptures, but what amazes me at the end of this story is the emphasis that nothing was wasted. God can use everything for God's purpose. Even the fragments of our lives, even the bits and pieces we think of as unimportant.

I wish, in our own country, we had a better sense of respect for the leftovers—whether we are speaking literally about food, or whether symbolically about our attitude toward people we deem as unworthy. We are a wasteful society, in so many ways.

Just a few facts about food waste. A report from several years ago indicates that in the US, 30-40% of the food supply is wasted, equaling more than 20 pounds of food per person per month. An estimated 70 billion pounds of food goes to waste each year, yet there are nearly 49 million people in America who feel the effects of food insecurity.

It is estimated that 25 – 40% of food grown, processed and transported in the US will never be consumed.

When food is disposed in a landfill it rots and becomes a significant source of methane - a potent greenhouse gas with 21 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide.

In 1980, food waste accounted for less than 10 percent of total waste; today, it makes up well over a fifth of the country's garbage. Americans, in 2012, threw out more food than plastic, paper, metal, or glass—and by a long shot.

There is a growing concern today about doing what we can to end food waste. Partly it has to do with making better choices about the food we eat – eating nutritional foods for the sake of good health. And partly realizing not all our food has to win the beauty contests. Much more could be said about food waste in our country. The point is that God's intention is that all have enough, that nothing is wasted—not food, not people!

God's generosity overflows.

God overrides scarcity with abundance

In our abundance, it is important to remember those who have so little, and to pray that we might be used as God's instruments to be co-creators of generosity, of kindness, of compassion, of love.

There is a line in the traditional Jewish Passover with the word "**Dayenu**," which means "it is enough for us." It begins, "If God had only brought us out of Egypt it would have been enough"; the second verse adds, "If God had only given the Torah of Truth, it would have been enough" ... then continues for thirteen more verses with the same refrain.

Walter Brueggemann has written a powerful prayer titled, "Giver, Giver, Giver"

Creator, giver of goodness, creator of all that is,
dayenu – loaves abound!
Redeemer, giver of new creation Spirit, multiplier of loaves
We are children of your bounty,
daughters and sons of privilege
We live midst ample food, ample clothes,
ample housing, ample cars, ample stereos,
ample friends, ample security.
We have ample and count on it,
reckoning our luxuries to be necessities.
And we are grateful.

In our gratitude,
we notice the war refugees...;
we notice the war on poverty,
even with our government surpluses;
we notice our ample housing

along with 20,000 in Atlanta on the streets;
we notice how you grace our church
midst our fear and rage and cunning;
we wonder about our grades
and our worth and our honor;
we ask about inheriting eternal life
and turn away with our great possessions.

Giver, Giver, Giver who overrides fear in utterance
who overrides scarcity in abundance
who overrides parsimony in generosity,
we are among the 5,000
we are dazzled by twelve baskets left.
Our gratitude does not match your generosity,
but we are grateful
For all your gifts including the gift of your very own life to us,
We give you thanks. Amen.