

Sunday February 5th

Sermon – Feeding Each Other

This community does many things well. But one of the things we do really, really well, I think, is a potluck dinner. Such a simple idea, but it works so fabulously. And like many simple ideas, it contains a lesson about how we can live together in a spirit of love and support.

The term “potluck” originated in the Middle Ages in Europe. The practice of most folks at that time was to never throw away a food item. Leftovers from any meal would be put into a pot and kept warm. If neighbors or visitors stopped by, the host could feed them with what he or she had going in the pot at that moment. Taverns and inns in Medieval times would particularly follow this practice. When customers showed up for a meal, they took the “luck of the pot.” Thus, potluck.

In the late 19th century in North America, the meaning of potluck morphed into its current usage. One contributor to Wikipedia calls it “a communal meal, where guests bring their own food.” But this isn’t really quite it, is it? Because in a potluck we don’t bring our *own* food. We bring food for others. And others bring food for others. And together we create a feast in which all are fed through our collective gifts. A literal, edible metaphor. And a kind of miracle that gets acted out every time we do it. We arrive with a salad and are treated to a multiple-course meal.

Miracle stories about food are everywhere in scripture and mythology. One such story Stephen read for us earlier, the tale of the loaves and the fishes. This event is

described no fewer than six times in the four Gospels. Each version is a bit different, but the basics are the same.

Great masses of people have followed Jesus out into the wilderness to hear him teach. At the end of the day, the disciples worry because they have no way to feed these folks. They ask Jesus to send the people away so that they can travel to the nearest town and buy food for themselves. But Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people by sharing their own food.

He has them ask the crowd to gather in smaller circles in which they face each other. Then he takes the small amount of food and blesses it, as any good Jewish host would do, and puts it in baskets for the disciples to distribute. In the end, everyone eats and is satisfied—and there are even leftovers to spare.

Some would say that this is a traditional miracle story in which Jesus uses supernatural powers to create food for them all. But maybe it was a different sort of miracle that took place that day. Unitarian Universalist minister Christine Robinson, in her book *Listening Hearts*, imagines a somewhat different scenario. She tells it something like this:

Imagine that you are an Israelite of the time. Your name is Abraham or Rebecca and you are a curious sort of person. You have followed Jesus out into the desert to hear what he has to say. And what he has to say is revolutionary. You had to bring your kids, of course, and you knew it was a long way. And as a matter of fact you did come prepared for a long day, because you're no dummy. You have a skin of water and some bread and smoked fish and even a few dates. Enough for your family, but not too much more. You have been too excited to eat much, though the kids have had a share.

Toward the end of the afternoon, you notice a commotion at the front, up near Jesus and his friends. Word gets around that you all are to be seated in smaller groups together.

Now, all day you have been hearing about love and community and new life but this is the first time you've noticed those around you. You look around your group. You see a man who is clearly ill, a woman who came with her teenaged daughter, some families, some elders, and a few young men. You gather in a circle and sit. Stretching your neck, you see Jesus blessing a couple of baskets of bread and you see the disciples starting to pass them around. Your group is in the back and nobody is coming your way. All day long you have been hearing about love and community and new life, so what do you do? You smile at the people around you and unwrap the food you have brought, and they do the same. Not everyone has brought food but the love you have heard about and the community you are now sharing with strangers makes what there is go a long way. It is a deeply satisfying meal. Everyone is content, and there are even leftovers to put in the baskets when they go around.

Perhaps the miracle that took place that day is not unlike the one that takes place at our potluck dinners. It's not so hard to imagine. Perhaps the miracle of the loaves and the fishes was not the multiplication of the food, but in the softening of hearts in people who heard a message of radical love and then sat down together in a circle and got to know each other.

Wisdom tales about sharing food can be found all around the world throughout history. There is something elemental about them. When we feed one another we literally give each other life. We are kept alive by one another.

One of these stories exists in both the Hindu and Jewish traditions. The Hindu version goes something like this¹:

Once, long ago, a man named Amul, scorched from the summer sun, sat under a large pipal tree to rest in its shade.

He soon discovered that this was a magic tree that could grant him wishes. Every time he thought of something he wanted, that thing appeared to him. He thought about delicious food and drinks and they suddenly materialized for him to consume. He was amazed at his good fortune. Is this just like heaven, he wondered? He thought that perhaps a holy man could tell him. Instantly a man appeared and stood in front of him.

“I wish to see heaven,” Amul said.

The holy man said, “I can take you to heaven, but the road to get there leads through hell first. You can’t travel to heaven without passing through hell.”

Amul agreed and they both vanished from under the tree. They landed in hell at noontime. Before them, they saw a table laden with every delicious food Amul had ever seen and many more he couldn’t have even dreamed of.

Amul’s fascination was interrupted by the clanging of a loud bell. Hundreds of people, scrawny and thin, raced to the table, necks craned toward the feast, arms stretched to grab the food. Each had very long wooden spoons bound to their arms and wrists. Because of these long spoons they could not use their hands to eat. They scooped up food but the spoons were so long that they could not get any into to their mouths. Starving, they dashed around the table: lentils flew through the air, heaps of rice landed underfoot, sweets rolled away. Not a single bite landed in a single mouth.

The bell rang again. "Lunch is over," boomed a loud voice. Still desperately hungry, the people reluctantly turned and walked away.

The holy man said, "This is hell. Now, let's go visit heaven."

Away they flew to heaven, where it was also time to eat. The lunch bell clanged the moment they arrived. Just like in hell, there were tables, piled with mountains of the same delicious food they had seen before, stretched as far as the eye could see. As people approached, Amul noticed with alarm that they, too, had long spoons bound to their arms.

"Eat!" a voice boomed. But the crowd did not rush to feed themselves. Instead, each person scooped up some food and turned to feed someone else.

And in this way, sharing the food, giving it to one another, all were fed. They emptied the platters without wasting any of it. Full of joy, friends one and all, they turned from the tables and went on their way.

The holy man looked at Amul, who was gazing at the scene with an understanding nod. "This is heaven," he said.

The moral of the story hardly needs to be said. It is through feeding each other that we are fed. It is the paradox of abundance. By giving away that which provides life, we receive what we need to stay alive.

Wisdom tales about food often tell us that our need for security and care are best met when we invest in the well-being of others. This seems to be true in our personal relationships, in community, and on a national level as well.

On a personal level, we make friends when we give our attention to the people we know. And when we open ourselves up enough to receive attention in return.

In her poem “Morning Song” that Alissa read for us earlier, Marcia Brown describes what she calls a love song about a friend who has endured tragedy. She writes: “Just this, each day: bear yourself up on small wings to receive what is given. Feed one another with such tenderness, it can almost be an answer.”

Providing nourishment for a friend is as close to an answer as we will find, I think, in a life that is all at once full of pain and joy, suffering and beauty. It is an answer that describes love. It says, in a way, that love is not like a bank account, in which the more we spend the less we have. It is more like a muscle—the more we use it, the stronger it gets. And it’s the only thing that save us, in the end.

In community settings, directing our gifts outward also has a way of returning to us. As just one example, church consultants tell us that when congregations give away a portion of their collection plate each week to a worthy cause, they discover that they collect more in the plate than they ever did before. And pledging levels increase as well. It is a kind of institutional version of the loaves and the fishes story—the baskets are passed around and people are fed and there are leftovers when the baskets come back.

These principles apply on much larger scales too—in our country and the wider world. Especially now. The metaphor of the potluck dinner seems more relevant than ever. Each morning, it seems, the news delivers new headlines about a politics of fear that has enveloped us. We see hoarding, protective policies that set us against one another.

Nationalistic slogans such as “America First” sound suspiciously like a collective version of “Me First.” We have forgotten lessons from history such as the Marshall Plan, when after World War Two we gave more than \$12 billion to European countries to help

them rebuild. That would be the equivalent of \$120 billion today. And when those nations recovered thanks in part to our gifts, they became friendly trading partners that brought us great prosperity. We received because first we gave.

But we see now a turn toward protectionism and border closures. A time of withholding our gifts rather than sharing them.

In the absence of potluck politics, many of us feel the call of a potluck activism. A movement to which we can each bring our small gifts and together create a feast of resistance. If love in action is like a muscle, then these times call on us to exercise it now more than ever. [pause]

There is a Cherokee wisdom tale in which an elder is teaching his grandchildren about life. He says to them, "A terrible fight is going on inside me between two wolves.

"One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, lies, false pride, and ego.

"The other wolf stands for joy, peace, love, hope, humility, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too."

The children were quiet for a minute and then one child asked earnestly, "Grandfather, which wolf will win?"

The elder replied, "The one you feed."

Communities like this one help us to feed that part of ourselves that is generous and compassionate and trusting and faithful. We need one another in order to be kind, just as we need to give in order to receive.

Forrest Gump said that life is like a box of chocolates. Our faith tells us that life is more like a potluck dinner. We bring our gifts to the common table and are fed by the generosity of our neighbors. We have always been good at that here at First Church. Let that practice guide us in the days to come, and in the struggle for a world marked by more love and less fear.

Our closing hymn is #1060 in the teal hymnal, "As We Sing of Hope and Joy."

Would you please rise as you are able.

ⁱ This is a shortened version of the tale as retold by Sarah Conover and Abhi Janamanchi in their collection *Katha Sagar: Ocean of Stories*.