

Leftovers

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Molli and I are at a stage of life when it can be pretty tough to figure out where we are going on major holidays.

I have made a decree in our family that if people want to see us on Christmas, they have to come to us, since I work pretty late that night.

But every year, the Thanksgiving negotiations are complex.

Actually, they will probably be starting up pretty soon to be honest.

We could host we have before.

Or go to see my Mom and her partner.

Or my Dad and his spouse.

Or go down to the cape to spend the holiday with Molli's parents.

That is not to mention the factor of our siblings, and their schedules, since my Mom might want not just to have a meal with each of us, but to have a meal with both of us together.

Every year it turns into a completed puzzle, with too many moving pieces. I feel like I need a spreadsheet to figure out the optimal plan.

And this past year, we ran into a particular sticking point.

It was very obvious from all of my careful calculations that one thing that made no sense at all was for us to travel to the Cape for Thanksgiving.

We had been there the year before, and we hadn't seen my Mom on Thanksgiving in many years.

It seemed the best plan was for Molli and I to host. Invite all our parents siblings, whoever could make it.

Plus we had that big roasting pan that we got for our wedding that we had never used before.

Still, we faced resistance.

Almost as if there was one last little detail that was a cause for concern, and finally, it came out.

Leftovers.

Molli's parents, accustomed to hosting Thanksgiving at their own house, were worried that going to someone else's home would deprive them of leftovers.

So with our assurance that they could take all they wanted, the date was set, and it was a great celebration.

As the meal was winding down, and the dishes piling up. Molli's father produced an unopened box of gallon-sized ziplock bags, and with a nod from me, he went to work.

It did get me thinking about something though. With all the fuss that we make about the meal, the beautiful presentation, candles, centerpieces, and the best china.

Aren't the leftovers the best part?

I don't know about you, but for me, having a little stuffing with my eggs the next morning, is almost sweeter than the Thanksgiving meal itself.

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You have probably heard today's story before. About Jesus, feeding a crowd on the hillside.

Word has gotten out about Jesus. About his teaching, and about his healing.

About the miracles he works.

About the way that you somehow just feel more alive when you are near him.

About how real he makes God's love.

And so the crowds are growing and growing. So desperate. So hopeful. So much longing for a word from his lips, or a touch of his hands, even a glimpse of God's child come to set them free.

So focused on him. That they forgot themselves. In such a rush to reach him, that they forgot to make plans for supper.

And so now, the sun is growing lower in the sky, and all across the hillside, stomachs are rumbling.

And Jesus, I imagine with a wry smile, turns to the disciples and says:
“give them something to eat.”

Impossible. “There are 5,000 men here,” they said, “not to mention women and children.”

Which, just as an aside. Not mentioning women and children is a frequent failure of ancient texts. And one that we ought not replicate by calling this the Feeding of the 5,000. Let’s give God all the credit God deserves, and call it the feeding of the 20,000.

So a crowd of children, women, and men, who have come to be with God’s anointed one, are hungry, and the disciples are out of ideas.

We don't have enough money to buy them food.

But Jesus has an idea. He takes what little they have, a few loaves of

bread and some fish, gives God thanks, has the people sit and passes them around.

Then, scripture says, all ate there fill.

But not just that. When they passed the baskets around to collect the leftovers there was even more leftover than there was to begin with.

This is one of the very few stories about Jesus that appears in all 4 gospels. Just as a point of comparison, only 2 of the 4 gospels tell the story of Jesus birth, and only 3 out of 4 fully tell the story of his resurrection.

But all four gospels tell this story.

In fact. Mark and Matthew both tell it twice.

So this story is told. Six times. In four gospels.

Something about this story, this memory from Jesus extraordinary ministry, so resonated with those writers that they could not tell his story without recounting this miracle.

To be sure this miracle impacted a lot of people. But really just for a day. They would awake hungry again tomorrow.

It's not as lasting as curing a leper. Or returning sight to the blind.

So why this story. Why is it that the story of Christ cannot be told without telling this story.

I think it is because it is emblematic.

This story is so typical of the Jesus that they knew.

It communicates in some very real way the way that they all felt when they were around him.

The gospel writers hearts were burning in their chests to try, to really try, to help you and I understand what it was about the Jesus. What he was like.

And this story.

This miracle.

Tells that story.

Not just because Jesus can do something seemingly magical. Make a little bread into a lot of bread.

In the scope of his miracles, it would have been low on the list.

No, I think that the reason they all told this story, was because of a detail that they all included.

The leftovers.

When Jesus was done, there was more leftover than there had been to begin with.

What this story tells us, that they couldn't tell us any other way is that to be around Jesus was to feel such an abundance of God's presence, God's love, and God's grace, that you could drink as deep as you could, fill yourself with all the goodness and the glory, take it all in, and still feel like there was so much left.

It is that experience of the fullness of God. That no matter how much love God pours out for us there is always more love for us and for all.

No matter how much forgiveness God grants us, there is always more forgiveness for us and for all.

No matter how much peace God sends, there is more.

No matter how much comfort God brings, there is more.

No matter how many times God reaches out, there is another, and another and another.

Always plenty leftover. Enough for us. Enough for all.

Yes, that's it. That's it.

But there is something else too. Something else that these writers are straining for us to hear.

It is that there was *more* leftover than there was to begin with. *More*.

So there is something about the love of God that people met in Jesus that made them feel not just like there was an abundance for them, but that in their own experience of that love, the love became even bigger.

Almost as if what was already overwhelming abundant in God.

Became even more abundant in the depths of their hearts.

That God's love made them love more deeply.

That God's peace made them into peacemakers

That God's forgiveness made even their own resentments toward others melt away.

I hear all that. And it makes me wish I could have been there.

Because I hear these authors, telling this story, again and again, as if they are straining to help us understanding what it was like. To be there. With him.

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Any yet God's promise to us is that even though Christ is no longer walking through our world. No longer there for us to visit on a hillside. No longer able to speak with human lips, or touch with human hands.

The abundance of God's love that people felt in his presence is the true abundance of God's love that is available to us all. Even still. Even now.

Perhaps harder to find now that it is not expressed in flesh and blood. But never gone.

So abundant, that no matter how much we receive. There is plenty leftover.

Yes, that's it. That's it.

But there is something else too.

All that God pours into each of our lives does not stay there. It rushes out into the world, it gets bigger, and stronger, and deeper, and wider, and fuller, and ever more beautiful.

So that the love, and forgiveness, and peace, that we have to share is enough for all. And there is plenty leftover.

And if we were to find a basket big enough.

Or a 2 gallon ziplock bag.

And gather up all those leftovers. All the stay excesses of God's love that surround us.

If we were to gather all that up.

And see it.

Then just like those people on that hillside in Galilee, all those years ago.

It might just be the closest we ever come, to truly understanding just how great our God truly is.

