

“How Much Is Enough?”
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2 Samuel 11:1-15
John 6:1-21

Wendall Berry, the American writer, Christian, and environmental activist, once mused, “We learn from our gardens to deal with the most urgent question of the time: How much is enough?” I am sure that Jane, Mineko, and Nancy all are very thoughtful about how much sun, how much water, how much shade, how much pruning, is necessary in order to coax beauty from the plants they nurture. David learned some amazing lessons shepherding, if indeed he is the one who wrote Psalm 23. But he could have used some lessons from gardening, too-- especially when it comes to enough.

Deuteronomy 17:17 instructs that once Israel is given a king, “he must not acquire many wives for himself.” By the time David spies on Bathsheba, he already has 6 wives.

I used to think Bathsheba had that name because she was taking a bath when David noticed her. Reading the story as an adult, I see it could be included in the “Me, too” movement. Bathsheba, too. Historically this story has been characterized as an example of an affair. But what we see here is not simply two consenting adults having a romance. David sends messengers “to get her;” this is not a romantic falling in love. It is a person with great power demanding an encounter with one of his subjects. What he does to try to cover his tracks-- he orchestrates a murder to one of his most loyal subjects-- is deplorable. We will see how his actions ripple down into family dysfunction.

While I am not going to preach on David or Bathsheba, I do want to name this story, because I believe it’s important to be honest about these stories of sex, violence, and power, because I know there are people who have been harmed by the abuse of sex, violence, and power. I want you to know, you are not alone.

But even the most dysfunctional family can be redeemed, although that may not come for generations later. Matthew lists Bathsheba-- and, implicitly, David-- as ancestors to Jesus, the Messiah.

The story of the feeding of the thousands is the only miracle story-- besides the resurrection-- that occurs in all four gospels. It also asks the question, “How much is enough?” But instead of the focus being one person hoarding for himself what is not his, it is a story of abundant sharing, a generosity that covers a community so that there is enough for all.

What miracle happened that day on the mountain at the edge of the Sea of Galilee?

Today, some might say that the miracle was not that 5,000 were fed, but that 5,000 could safely gather in one place! Whether you would love to listen to music at Lincoln Center, watch a Broadway show, or feel the smallness of being in an indoor sports arena without limits, without COVID, or simply be at church with everyone safely there, you are not alone.

But seeing that beyond the fear of leprosy, a woman hemorrhaging, or being struck with blindness, Jesus' contemporaries were blissfully off the hook from worrying about coronaviruses, I think the real miracle we can look at here is the feeding of the 5,000.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples tell Jesus that it's getting late; there are no markets or restaurants around; let the crowd go, so they can head into the surrounding villages to find lodging and something to eat. In John, instead of the disciples suggesting they send the crowds home, Jesus asks the disciples, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"-- but John notes that Jesus already knew what he was going to do-- he only asked this question to test them.

The crowd is so big that 6 months of one person's wages would not be enough to feed them all! Still, it seems that because Jesus has already laid out the expectation that they *will* feed the people, they look for whatever resources they could find. It comes from a child: five loaves, two fish.

Isaiah proclaimed a vision of well-being in a poem known as "The Peaceable Kingdom, "And a little child shall lead them." Whether this child's loaves and fish inspired a supernatural miracle, or whether he inspired a radical, holy sharing does not seem to matter so much as the idea that there was suddenly enough for all- with 12 baskets left over!

Over the weekend I finally watched the award-winning movie *Judas and the Black Messiah*, which portrayed the story of the betrayal of Fred Hampton, who was the leader of the Illinois chapter of the black, revolutionary organization The Black Panthers. A poignant moment in the movie came when I saw what seemed to bring The Black Panthers the most influence:

- It was not through their willingness to resort to violence-- although their argument that peaceful protests, in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, were not enough to bring liberation to black Americans still has uncomfortable truth today.
- It was not in their Maoist propaganda that challenged American capitalism.

What seemed to be the foundation for their power was **breakfast**. They were out in their communities, making sure the neighborhood children and their families were fed with the Free Breakfast Program for School Children, which was started by the Black Panthers in an Afro-Episcopal church in Oakland, CA. Black Panthers and local church members would go to local grocery stores to ask for donations; they would consult nutritionists to give children healthy meals. The program-- which was the first of its kind in the nation-- spread to Black Panther Party chapters nationwide, until they were feeding tens of thousands of hungry children.

Party members and local church members together would make the rounds to grocery stores to ask for donations to feed the neighborhood children. It worked. The abundance multiplied. Soon, Black Panther chapters all over the country were feeding children. And the impact went beyond food. As one parishioner of the original church that housed the feeding program said, “The school principal came down and told us how different the children were; they weren’t falling asleep in class, they weren’t crying with stomach cramps.”¹ The Black Panthers began adding free medical clinics in some of the sites, and educational opportunities for the kids.

The success of the Free Breakfast Program alarmed the FBI. Its director at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, called the program “potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for”². The response was swift. Some sites were raided. Parents were told lies that the food had been diseased. In Chicago, police broke in and urinated on the food that was to be served to children.

Still, the power of food is strong and endures. In time, the program that the Black Panthers had put together showed how well children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally over the simple act of feeding. Now, children who live under a certain income level are entitled to free lunch. Not only that, school districts as big as San Francisco, New York City, and Atlanta provide free breakfast and/or lunch to all students, regardless of family income, so there is no stigma for getting a free lunch.

I would like to challenge our church, in each season of our lives, to consider how we are stretching ourselves beyond what we think is possible so that we are not taking more than enough, but that we are, as a community, sharing more than enough. You can know the difference by seeing what is leftover. For David, what is leftover is remorse, guilt, and an overwhelming amount of family dysfunction. Leftover from a child’s 5 loaves and 2 fish, there were 12 leftover baskets of food. I’m not saying that if you give in ways that may feel sacrificial, you will end up with a bigger bank account. But you also don’t have to spend half your yearly income. It may be as simple as giving a loved one in your home 20 minutes more of focused, caring attention than you think you have energy for that day-- or reaching out in a phone call if you live alone. It’s amazing how far that little bit more can go in fostering connection. As a congregation, we will share boxes of food staples and fresh produce with food-insecure neighbors from our community on August 14, when we host the Emergency Food Pantry Pop-Up. I suspect that we have the resources to share in even more abundant ways. When this is our witness, we show how relevant, and how compelling, the ways of Jesus are.

¹ Erin Blakemore, “How the Black Panthers’ Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government” on History.com, January 29, 2021.

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