

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In years past, this gospel story was one of the easier ones to preach. It has great connections to the gathering of God's people in the Hebrew Scriptures from Moses to Elijah to Elisha; it's an easy connection to when Jesus broke bread gathered around a table with his disciples at the Last Supper; and it naturally focuses us toward our shared meal at the table of Holy Communion. But this year, it's different. This time around, the world has changed. You and I, we are *not* gathering together, we are *not* able to legally gather with twelve other friends to celebrate at a restaurant, and we are *not* physically gathering at the table of Communion.

Maybe you are feeling it as well. Pastors, theologians, seminarians, and worshipers are trying to make meaning of this new reality where we are separated. And, even when churches have space to gather for outdoor worship, their communal meal feels disembodied with strict distancing rules and new Communion procedures. It's easy to wonder if this Livestream is really "the church" in this deserted place.

And, that's where today's gospel begins—that is, a deserted place without people. Into that deserted place, people followed Jesus and it got late. It was dinner time, and no restaurants were in sight. People were getting hungry and perhaps even a bit angry that Jesus had gone to this deserted place. Those people were likely getting hangry—that is hungry and angry.

While most of us, generally, have our bodily needs met, I think our nation and maybe even the globe is hangry. We're hungry for a time when we can gather together on *our*

own terms. We're angry at the ways the pandemic has emphasized inequality and vulnerabilities. And, we're growing more hangry as the pandemic continues, as gun violence rises, as economic data looks bleak, as unemployment benefits run dry, and as agencies forecast a dire future across the globe. Sure, while we might not be physically hangry in the wilderness with Jesus, it feels like we're in some kind of wilderness and, darn it, we're hangry.

But, in the wilderness of today's Gospel, we heard that Jesus took a meager five loaves and two fish, blessed the meal, and told the disciples to equitably distribute the food which fed over 5,000 people. It was a profound moment—a moment where what seems like “not enough” became abundance; a moment where sharing led to abundant life for all; a moment where Jesus gave and then, told the disciples to give.

And, that's probably the thing that grabs me the most from today's reading—namely, that Jesus gave the blessed food to the disciples and the disciples helped to nourish the people. After all, as Lutherans, we acknowledge that God is *always* the first and *primary* actor. God is our provider; God gives to us abundantly and indiscriminately; God is the one who first loves us. Then, you and I, we have the opportunity to replicate God's gifts as we equitably provide access and opportunity to that abundance. *We* become the hands and feet of God to help distribute God's gifts. *We* become the conduits for God's love, grace, and abundant life. *We* become partners with what God has done and continues to do.

And, that truth from today's Gospel reading, seems oh-so real to me while looking at worldwide hunger. After all, the United Nations acknowledges that there is enough food produced today to feed everyone on the planet, and at the same time, hunger is on the rise. Get that: we have enough food. In fact, we have an abundance of food.

Yet, because of food waste, unequal distribution, climate change linked destruction, lack of crop diversity, conflict, and governmental mismanagement to name a few, on a typical year 135 million people's lives are at risk. Add to that a pandemic, and it's forecast that by the end of 2020 acute hunger will almost double putting 130 million *more* lives and livelihoods at risk.^{1,2} But, remember, we have enough food for all. In fact, early on in the pandemic we had so much extra food that farmers were literally dumping milk, eggs, and destroying produce at an alarming rate.³

Friends, God has abundantly provided for all of creation, and like the disciples, God has given us food to feed the masses. We have the tools, we have the support from our God, and we have the opportunity to be the hands and feet of God as we distribute the gifts of God for the people of God. And, sometimes, it doesn't always look the way we imagine. Sometimes responding to hunger looks like working towards being an anti-racist. It requires that we acknowledge that those who face racial discrimination and racial trauma are almost twice as likely to struggle with hunger. It necessitates that we look at the prison system, with its disproportional incarceration of Brown and Black people, and acknowledge that 91% of formerly incarcerated people are food insecure following their release.⁴ Sometimes responding to hunger means that those of us with privilege look at the abundance we have and we share it with our neighbors. That is why, the Presiding Bishop of our denomination (that's like the ELCA pope) has called on us to contact our congressmembers to encourage them to help those who are hungry during this pandemic with the next COVID relief bill. The ELCA has an easy way to advocate using an electronic form with suggestions of ways to focus your letter. Later today, I'll be sending a link out to

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>

² <https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/business/coronavirus-destroying-food.html>

⁴ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hunger-food-insecurity-racism-mariana-chilton/>

our e-news list for you to participate. So that, together, though in this desert place, we can be united in feeding the hungry and being the hands and feet of God.

And, here at Wicker Park Lutheran, this is nothing new for us. We try to remember that what so often seems deficient is often abundantly given by God. We work to explore the gifts in our midst and align them with needs in the world. Things like sharing our building with the community, even in the midst of the pandemic as we offer childcare to parents. Using our roof space to produce solar energy to slow climate change. And, taking steps towards becoming an anti-racist organization.

And so, right now, it may feel like a desert moment—separated from each other and distanced from one another at God’s table. Yet, in this moment we have the opportunity to notice the abundance freely given by God and then, to give of that abundance. We have the ability to use our voice to call another member and find connection in our distance; we have the opportunity to share the gifts of our pantry as they become the body and blood of Christ when we gather as God’s community; and we have the opportunity to use our hands to feed the hungry. For God so loved us that God has abundantly given, and so too, we might abundantly give of God’s grace. Amen.