

Solidarity Feeding

Matthew 14:13-21 | 8/6/2017

In some neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, you might pass a small café and see a refrigerator sitting up against the store wall. Over the fridge is a sign, which reads, "Take freely, only what you need." Seriously. People can walk up to that fridge, open the door, take what they need and walk away. These "solidarity fridges," or "social fridges," are a way of showing to the poor and needy that there are, in fact, people who care about them, stand with them and want to help.

In fact, most of the fridges in Buenos Aires are part of an initiative started by NGO Red Solidaria – The Solidarity Network. The sidewalk fridges remove to a great extent the need for the poor and homeless to beg for food. It's not like a soup kitchen where the homeless have to line up, hold out their plates and a worker fills their bowls with soup or food. No, in this model, the homeless or poor can get food themselves, take what they need and leave the rest.

The food itself is put into the fridges by café and restaurant owners and sometimes by concerned citizens. By putting food in curbside fridges, cafés are redistributing food that otherwise would've been thrown in the trash and wasted, while, at the same time, helping to feed people in need.

The movement has spread to Córdoba and other cities in Argentina, and now, it has jumped to other countries as well -- Saudi Arabia, Spain and even India.

Of course, you can't just leave *anything* in these fridges. The rules are pretty strict: no meat or eggs and packaged or canned goods cannot be past their use-by date. Moreover, anything prepared at home must include a label about *when* it was made. And -- no raw fish! Bread is okay. But no fish.

Unless you're Jesus. Then you accept fish and bread, even if the donation isn't very much. In today's Bible story, the donation was five little barley loaves and two little fish. Yet, this little faith-filled donation fed thousands!

Here's the back story. Jesus has been teaching people in the countryside. A crowd has gathered and the afternoon slips by. It was one of those magical days when we lose all track of time.

But what could Jesus say to enthrall these people who scarcely had an afternoon to spare? These were common folk who had a hard life. Children labored alongside their parents -- if not in the fields, then in the carpentry shop or over the hot fires of a blacksmith's forge perhaps. Life was hard and the peasants died young. And all the while, they worked in the shadow of their Roman oppressors.

Yet, even so, here they were, out in the countryside, listening to this man Jesus. They were huge fans. When Jesus cast off from shore to escape the crowds in order to grieve over the death of John, they trooped around the lake on foot to find him -- no easy task considering the size of Galilee.

We don't know what Jesus said to these people who had followed him to a "deserted place." But we *do* know that both the crowds and Jesus were linked by one common desire: They *both* needed consolation and encouragement. *Jesus* had just lost his cousin, John. "(John's) disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus" (v. 12). When Jesus heard it, he ran for a boat and paddled off for a "deserted place," perhaps hoping to be alone (v. 13). The *crowds* saw in Jesus someone who could make their lives better, so they followed him..

Instead of being irritated when the crowds arrived "on foot" to his "deserted place," Jesus saw them and had compassion -- and he spent the afternoon healing the sick.

It's possible that he also taught them, feeding their souls. The gospel of Luke suggests that this is precisely what happened. Not surprisingly, he talked about the nature of the rule, or kingdom, of God and the people of God's commonwealth (Luke 9:11). But Matthew says nothing at all about any teaching. All we read is that "he had compassion for them and cured their sick" (v. 14). Grieving over the loss of his childhood friend, his colleague in ministry and close family member, Jesus still had compassion and spent an entire afternoon working the "great crowd," curing their sick.

Perhaps working with the people who needed deliverance and encouragement fed Jesus' soul and strengthened him for the work that was ahead of him.

Although this story -- a story found in all four gospels -- is usually called "The Feeding of the 5,000," *the feeding was just part of the story*, and it happened only at the end of the day -- and the number is closer to 10,000 than 5,000.

The primary focus of Jesus' afternoon work, as we've said, was not *feeding* the body, but *curing* the body. And when Jesus did this, he also touched something deeper, something in the soul that realigned them with God.

He cured their sick – and he

- + didn't ask them to sign a doctrinal statement,
 - + didn't ask them to make a pledge,
 - + didn't ask them to go to synagogue next Sabbath,
 - + didn't ask them to register as a Pharisee or Sadducee,
 - + didn't ask them if they'd been divorced,
 - + didn't ask them if they were for or against gun control,
 - + didn't ask if they were pro-life and
 - + didn't discriminate because of gender (women and children were healed and fed, too).
- Jesus just cured them and fed them.

When the sun was sinking, the disciples realized that the people would be getting hungry, so they suggested that Jesus send the crowds away in order to get into town before nightfall and get something to eat. Jesus said, "No, let them stay." This was Jesus' approach: You don't send people away; you ask them to stay. And then you find out what they need, and then you meet the need.

So Jesus says, "You feed them." The disciples say, "We have nothing -- except five loaves and two fish." Jesus says, "Bring them here to me." This is all Jesus can ask. "Bring what you got. And I will do the rest."

The church has an opportunity to be the bread of life to people. We can act as solidarity fridges in our neighborhoods. The church can be a place where people are fed, both body and soul. This certainly applies to our Food Pantry. I know some people are amazed at how much we are able to do without the support of the Community Food Bank. It also applies to the way we open up our buildings to be used by groups in the community. And it applies to ideas like offering a free concert to members of the community, or organizing a special celebration in the park on a patriotic holiday, both ideas that are being explored. We can't do everything, but if we do everything we can, Jesus will bless the results.

If we get the bread, bless it, give thanks for it and distribute it, by the grace of God, there will be plenty for everyone.

Pastor Keith