

Something Out of Nothing – Mark 6:30-44

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All of us know what it's like to be hungry. We can all tell when we haven't eaten in a while and our stomachs start to growl. But, we know when our next meal is coming. We may not have a plan for where it will come, but we know it's coming most of the time—at a predictable hour.

While we know what being hungry feels like, we don't really know hunger. We don't worry about whether we will eat; we just know our meal is coming. People who know hunger, on the other hand, are uncertain when their next meal will be.

In 2023, the latest year for which we have data, 47.4 million people in the United States experienced food insecurity, which is a lack of access to affordable, nutritious food. This amounts to about 1 in 7 households. 1 in seven households in this country can't guarantee that they will have a meal on schedule.

As we express our gratitude for the peace of mind that comes from not having to worry about hunger in our own lives, we also recognize the need to address the needs of those today who do worry and agonize over their food insecurity. (The Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry is our go-to vehicle for helping in this area. And a reminder, our Posies for the Pantry flower sale to benefit the pantry will be Saturday, April 12.)

As we delve into stories of Jesus having meals with others in the gospels, our first story this Lent is the account of Jesus feeding thousands on a hillside—not around a table, obviously. And those gathered there were hungry and were likely to have known hunger.

Jesus knew hunger. He knew the story of his ancestors, of how the people of Israel found themselves enslaved to the Egyptians. And how Moses led them out of slavery—free but hungry. And how God, in their journey to freedom, provided manna every day in order to keep them from starving. It was daily food at the moment of greatest need. Bread in the wilderness.

And so, on this day, Jesus miraculously—like manna from heaven—provides a meal to the multitudes gathered on the hillside. Five loaves and two fish was all it took to feed everybody. Mark says they all ate that day and were satisfied, with plenty left over. Jesus turned nothing into something—an abundance.

Jesus provided in that moment.

While you and I don't usually have to wait long for our next meal, it doesn't mean we aren't hungry. It doesn't mean we don't thirst for something else. It doesn't mean we aren't hungry for hope, meaning, or purpose in our lives. And it doesn't mean that Jesus can't turn nothing into something, a vacancy of love into an abundance, an absence of meaning into a wealth of it, or no trace of hope into at least a sliver of it.

Jesus meets us and wants to provide.

This miracle of feeding we find in Mark today occurs in front of many. Those who were fed were part of a community in the countryside that day. Within that community—tight-knit or loosely formed, we don't know—Jesus fed them. They came together to receive.

In our spiritual hunger, we also come together to receive. We are more likely to be fed spiritually in a group of others who desire that same abundance.

I remember five years ago, as I know all of you do, how we were all physically distanced from each other due to the pandemic. For our safety, we were instructed to remain apart. And we came up with creative ways, thanks to technology, to worship together or have meetings or gatherings. But it wasn't easy.

The same goes for how we socialized with our friends. Do you remember Zoom gatherings with friends? Or outdoor gatherings only, with everybody sitting at a distance from each other?

Those days were hard on community. It was difficult for our souls to be fed when we were apart from each other.

But Jesus turned nothing into something. We found connection with each other, and were subsequently fed, by the ways our community with each other wouldn't be denied. We more easily realize our abundance when we are together.

Today, and every Sunday during this season, we will be fed at the table here by Christ himself. The bread and the cup are small. Just like manna from heaven, the elements will only curb our physical hunger for a brief moment. Yet, in this coming to the table, we are invited to be fed by the one whose spiritual nourishment is lasting, by the one who can turn nothing into something.

There's something magical that happens when we gather in Jesus' name. For the thousands on that hillside, it was the miracle of abundance that came from next to nothing. In our homes or other places where we share meals with family and friends, it's the connection that is formed by the breaking of bread together. For us here, it's something about gathering together in worship and coming to the table to dine on grace and hope.

Christ is present and does amazing work through his Spirit on these occasions.

A book titled *Meeting Jesus at the Table*, is the basis for our theme this Lent. And at the end of chapter one, one of the authors, Cynthia Campbell, writes, "We do not eat only because of the food we eat. The deep nourishment we need comes from God, whose very word is bread. Food that keeps body and soul together. The bread of life."

And like in this miracle of abundance, it's when Jesus turns nothing into something.