

“A Drop in the Bucket for a Crowd Like This”

John 6:1-14

Rev. Dorothy Boulton and Ellen Draper

Dorothy Boulton:

This story appears in all four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all write about Jesus healing the sick, attracting a crowd, and then speaking with his disciples how they were going to feed them.

In the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus poses this situation to the whole group, -- “the disciples.” Also in those three gospels, the group provides the answer together, “We have two loaves and five fishes.” “We have no more than five loaves and two fish.”

What struck me in the reading of John’s gospel account of this story is how specific the actors are. In John’s account, when Jesus sees the crowd, Jesus speaks to Philip and it is Philip who answers, “Six months wages wouldn’t be enough to provide enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

Also specifically, we hear that it is Andrew – identified not only by name, but also by his relation to his brother, Simon Peter -- who comes up to Jesus to announce that resources have been found. Even more, we are told who has provided those resources --- a child, a boy – who has five barley loaves and two fish.

With such specificity, I couldn’t help but consider these people more carefully, particularly Andrew and the unnamed child. What might Andrew have been thinking when he came up to Jesus and, needing food for 5000 people, said --- boldly? hesitantly? – “There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.”

Really? Was Andrew totally clueless about what it takes to cook for a large crowd ... I mean, this wouldn’t have fed even one of the disciples, probably. Was he clueless? Was he naïve? Or, maybe Andrew was so confident about Jesus’ abilities, that he knew that Jesus could do amazing things even with very little. Although, he wasn’t confident enough, or clueless enough, because he still says: What are these among so many people? Even he realizes: That’s a drop in the bucket for a crowd like this.

Clueless? Confident. My mind isn’t made up yet on Andrew. Feel free to speculate on your own.

Thinking about Andrew’s response led me to meditate on the actions of one other: this child, this “little boy”, the text says, whose lunchbox was raided to provide a starting point for the mega meal on the lawn, the feeding of a small stadium crowd with the equivalent of a McDonalds Happy Meal.

Who knows how this boy became aware that the disciples, and Jesus, were trying to provide food? Did the word get sent around through the crowd? Perhaps.

How did this child get word to Andrew? Did he make his way through the gathered throngs spurred on by the realization that he had food, he had something to share.

And why was it that it was a child who responded?

I like to think that it was this child's idea.... to share his meal, to bring it to Jesus's friends. This little one had so much trust. He did it without even questioning how ridiculously small this effort was. What was this in the face of so much need? This child, I imagine, didn't know it couldn't be done. He offered his meal with compassion and love, with a genuine wish to serve his neighbors, even when it was just a drop in the bucket for a crowd like that.

It's this child's faith, this boy's generosity, that enabled Jesus to feed those who were hungry. And it is the faith and the generosity of people like that child that are enabling us, as Jesus' friends and followers, to do the same for those who are hungry in the crowds gathered round us.

This morning we are highlighting the work and the ministry of many named and unnamed people whose hearts are moved to see that all are fed.

And we give thanks for them, for enabling us to share what we have as we proclaim God's abundance, and God's desire that no one leave the table hungry.

I am pleased to welcome Ellen Draper, one of those named and wonderful individuals, who will bring a word about food ministries in Catonsville and Baltimore. She is a member of St. Mark church and is head of the social justice committee, a role which she took on just over a year ago, just before the pandemic.

Ellen, thank you for sharing God's grace and God's word.

Ellen Draper:

Good morning. It is so nice to be here to worship with all of you this morning and to speak about food ministry, which is a big part of my life and something I am passionate about.

I first became involved in direct service to the poor about 15 years ago when I started volunteering with a ministry called Breaking Bread with the Hungry. For the past 35 years, Breaking Bread has provided a hot sit down dinner, take away bags, clothing, and toiletries to the poor, homeless, unsheltered, and anyone who wishes to join us. Our meals are served every Friday evening in the undercroft of a church near the Shot Tower downtown.

I was introduced to the ministry by my son, Jack when he was in the 5th grade. He attended a dinner with his cousins and after that experience of serving, he really wanted to go again. So, what mom can say no to that? From that time on, every Friday I picked up Jack from school and we drove downtown and helped serve the dinner. After several years of getting to know the guests, the other volunteers, and the folks who organize the dinner, I was asked to serve as the menu coordinator. My job is to organize the food donors and make sure that we have enough food for each dinner.

I've learned many things about poverty and food insecurity in my time with Breaking Bread. I've learned that people who live in poverty suffer from very poor dental health. They have loose and missing teeth and serious issues with gum disease and this impacts the type of food that we serve. Of course, we try to select healthy food options for our meals, but we can't serve some of the healthy items we would serve to our own families, such as crunchy granola bars, or raw apples, pears, or carrot sticks. When we get apples donated, for example, we have volunteers who turn them into baked apples, applesauce, or apple cobbler so they are softer and easier to eat.

People living in poverty also suffer from chronic illnesses at a high rate. For us, diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes are important considerations. This impacts even the most basic foods. For example, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We encourage our donors to consider wheat bread instead of white bread and all fruit spreads instead of jelly. And, we ask that they put peanut butter on both sides of the bread to prevent the jelly from leaking through. Sandwiches travel a bit before they reach the recipient. In Baltimore, as in most places, access to sinks and toilet facilities is very limited and even more so during the pandemic. So, dropping a few handi-wipes in lunch bags is a particularly nice thing to do.

This might sound surprising coming from someone like me who works to secure food donations, but one thing I've come to learn about food ministry is that it isn't really about the food. At the heart of it, at its core, food ministry is about relationships. The food serves as a vehicle by which we can begin to build relationships with the guests we serve and also with our fellow volunteers. Even the name of our ministry – Breaking Bread with the Hungry – acknowledges that all of us at that meal on Friday nights experience some type of hunger.

For some, the hunger is real, physical hunger. Each week, we have guests who tell us that they have not eaten all day or even for a couple of days. But that is not the norm. For many, volunteer and guest alike, there is a hunger for belonging, to be recognized and acknowledged, to be addressed in a dignified manner, to be part of a group, to share, to celebrate, and to be consoled or comforted.

Folks who live unsheltered often talk of feeling invisible. This comes from the isolation and violence they experience on the streets and the fact that many people

avert their eyes as they pass by to avoid making eye contact or starting a conversation. Loneliness and depression are common experiences.

So, there is a real need to have places to go where people know you, ask how you are doing, notice if you don't show up, and take stock of how you look and the clothes you are wearing.

We see this in today's Gospel passage. Jesus does not want the people to leave. He provides food for them and uses it as a vehicle to draw them into a closer, personal relationship with him.

During the pandemic, I had an experience involving food and relationship building right here in Catonsville. Back in March of 2020 when our churches shut down, a group of people from Catonsville Presbyterian, Salem Lutheran, and St. Mark started talking about how we were going to keep our community providers well supplied when our churches were closed, we didn't have access to kitchens, refrigerators, and freezers, and providers were not able to accept food prepared in private homes.

A decision was made to reach out to Catonsville churches to form a partnership to address food needs. Ultimately, our partnership included Catonsville Presbyterian, St. Mark, Salem Lutheran, Catonsville Methodist, Grace AME, New Hope Community, Christian Temple, Catonsville Emergency Assistance, and the Knights of Columbus. Working together, we focused on two types of outreach: (1) casseroles and other food to support direct service providers and (2) non-perishable food collections.

Our partnership of churches ran two Great Catonsville Casserole campaigns, one with Chef Paolino's and one with Dimitri's restaurant. Donations were sent to the restaurants and they prepared casseroles that were delivered to Our Daily Bread, the Westside Shelter and My Brother's Keeper. Over many months, volunteers from all of the churches delivered more than 1,300 casseroles.

After those campaigns, we learned that the needs of the providers had changed and that Westside Shelter and My Brother's Keeper were in need of sliced meat and cheese. They told us the meat and cheese were needed for sandwiches and for hot entrees such as hot turkey and hot roast beef with gravy, but the cost of those food items was rising rapidly.

So, in February 2021, we started the Meat Madness campaign. Our initial campaign was very successful, but the money was used up quickly, so we began our current campaign which we call "Meat Madness – Summer Edition." The way it works is between now and August 31st, simply send a check payable to Chef Paolino's and write "Meat Madness" in the memo line. Or, you can send a check here to the church with "Meat Madness" in the memo line and the church will send one big check to Chef P's. Every single dollar will be used to purchase the meat and cheese requested by the Westside Men's Shelter and My Brother's Keeper. To date, we have provided

more than 600 pounds of sliced meat, more than 2,400 slices of cheese, and a variety of other foods needed by the poor and homeless in our community.

The second project of our partnership involved non-perishable food collections for Catonsville Emergency Assistance and the food pantry at Grace AME Church. In the beginning, we collected non-perishable foods every week. We checked expiration dates, sorted, packed, and delivered the food. From the end of June 2020 through the end of October 2020, we collected about 11,000 pounds of food. In addition, on November 7, 2020, we ran a Fill-this-Truck food drive that collected just under 6,000 additional pounds of food.

Now that churches are reopening, we have shifted to a once-per-month collection schedule. Our final collection will be held on Friday, August 13, from 4-6 p.m. right here at Catonsville Presbyterian, and on Saturday, August 14, from 9 a.m. to noon at the Knights of Columbus Hall at 1010 Frederick Rd. I hope you will all turn out with generous donations so we can end on a real high note and put both food pantries in a strong position heading into the Thanksgiving and Christmas food basket season.

I do have good news to report from both Catonsville Emergency Assistance and the food pantry at Grace AME. Both are experiencing a decline in the number of families requesting temporary emergency food assistance. That is a great sign that folks are getting back to work and are in a more secure situation. However, prior to the pandemic, each of these organizations served hundreds of registered families, so there is significant food insecurity in our community and that needs to be addressed.

If there is a silver lining to our pandemic experience, I would say it is the relationships that were formed by the many volunteers from our partnership of churches. Working together, we learned about the specific needs of the providers in our community and we worked together to develop creative ways to meet those needs.

Here at Catonsville Presbyterian, we had fantastic donors and some very special outreach leaders. I'd like to give a special thank you to Nancy and Bill Henderson, Jenny Hutton, Tricia and Bob Cooper, Peggy Carr, Charre Symms, and Glenda Johnson. And, I know you are supported by your great leadership team headed by Rev. Kovacs and Rev. Boulton. Your generosity and compassion have been a blessing to me and many people in need. So thank you all very much and thank you for your time this morning.

Dorothy Boulton:

Ellen --- thank you for your ministry and for helping all of us to participate in caring for our neighbors.

As we prepare ourselves to reflect on what we will offer to God for God's work in the world, I would like to thank – by name – other faithful people in this important work of seeing that all are fed.

For our community leaders: Bonnie Harry, director of Catonsville Emergency Assistance, the food pantry just down the street.

For Vivian Watson and Robin Price who coordinate the work of Grace AME's food ministry. For Ellen Draper and all her volunteers.

For our church members:

Jenny Hutton, Trish and Bob Cooper, who have worked faithfully with the food collections & distribution, and for the Board of Deacons, and Members of the Mission Committee and the Envision Board for the work they have done, often behind the scenes.

For Tom Enokian, and for those before him, who serve the men of the West Side Shelter. Catonsville Presbyterian Church provides a monthly meal for the 150 residents of the shelter and has been doing so for many years.

For the youth of CPC, whose yearly Souper Bowl of Caring luncheon raises funds for that ministry.

For all our members and friends who give so generously from their shopping trips, from their checkbooks, to serve the needs of the community.

My final thought on the gospel text for now, is that John mentions those disciples by name for a reason: so that we will know that Jesus is calling our names, and asking us that question: *Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?*

Who will provide for this miracle of compassion?

Let us pray that our answer will be: Here we are Lord. We will hold these people in our hearts.