Seventeenth Sunday of the Year, Cycle B

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2021

Many traditions have their own version

 Of the stone soup parable

 The one I know is about a homeless family

that had only one possession, a cooking pot.

 When they arrived in a new village

 They were unsuccessful in attempts to beg food from the locals.

So they took their pot to the river, filled it with water

 Drop a large stone in it

 And place it over a fire.

 When a villager asks what they were doing

 the father explained they were making a family delicacy:

stone soup

 all it needed was a bit of garnish.

 One villager added a few vegetables to the soup

 another added some strips of dried meat;

 as more villagers were engage, and more ingredients contributed

 the stone soup actually became a tantalizing meal.

The story illustrates that out of lack and deprivation

 There can arise great nourishment

 even the very lavishness of God.

This is a message we get today

 Not only in the gospel, but in the lectionary design

 in which the Gospel of John

 helps the gospel of Mark make stone soup.

Mark is the shortest gospel

Not able to stretch out over an entire liturgical year

 Like Matthew and Luke.

out of this deficit of brevity

we are served up quite a feast thanks to John

 not just this week, but for five weeks in a row.

The Liturgical year treats John’s gospel in a special way:

 It does not have his own year as do the other gospels

 But is read in each year on central feasts

 Like Christmas and Holy Thursday.

 John is evoked these festal days

 Because of its symbolic richness

 And theological insight.

 This is nowhere as true as in John 6.

 There are many reasons why John 6 is so important.

 Its sacramental value is revealed when realizing that

While all of the other gospels have a last supper story

 With Jesus saying some version of

“this is my body - cup my blood”

 John’s last supper story - the longest in the gospels

 nowhere has Jesus speaking those sacred words.

 Instead, Jesus acts out what it means to be his body

 Through that memorable foot washing ritual only found in John.

If we want an explicit Johannine expose on bread, flesh and life,

We have to exit the Last supper context

 And journey back into this 6th chapter.

Like his last supper account

John’s theologizing does not start with a sermon but with action

Here not foot washing but feeding

 Not with words about the significance of Eucharist

 But actions that exemplify what it means to be Eucharist

 it is particularly the details: the beginning and ending of this story

the gift of a child and the promise of leftovers

that are notably rich.

First is the child

Revealed as an unexpected source of nourishment

 Rather than some prophet, disciple or even Jesus himself.

 As the unexpected messenger

 The boy’s own version of stone soup

 Nourishes the bodies of thousands

 And the souls of untold millions over the centuries.

This unexpected revelation confirms

 that God’s spirit operates beyond our imaginations;

 that care and nourishment can arrive

 even through the most unlikely of people.

A young married woman from Seattle, caring for her two children

while husband was away on a business trip

received a phone call from the police in Chicago

that her husband had died of a heart attack.[[1]](#footnote-1)

she wrote down the address of the hospital

 where his body was being held, on a slip of paper;

 drowning in grief, packed her overnight bag

 and traveled to Chicago.

 At the airport she handed the slip of paper to a cabbie

 Who drove her to the hospital.

 The hospital staff was waiting for her

 took her to the morgue

 where she identified her husband.

 As she was about to dissolve in grief

 She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder

 And a handful of Kleenex from behind.

 When she turned to learn the source of this care

 She was touched to see that it was the cabbie

 Who had parked his car

 And followed her into the hospital:

 an unforeseen angel of care.

Humanity, care, even ministry from the unexpected

 Is a gospel invitation to stay alert

 And be on lookout for God’s spirit

 Disguised as the other, the child, the cabbie.

But it is also a gospel invitation to be

 The unexpected source of ministry, of care, of Eucharist.

 Now you might be saying to yourself

 Would love to help out ... but I’m not the cabbie type

 who will park the car and follow you into the hospital.

 Life is too complicated, resources are low

 I cant even always afford the bread and fish.

But here is where we might get a little inspiration

 From another detail in John’s gospel:

 that after everyone had eaten their fill

 They gathered up the fragments that filled

twelve baskets of leftovers.

Leftovers usually don’t inspire much

 except gastronomic disappointment

 And sometimes the snide remark ...

I have a great friend, a presbyterian minister,

 Whose wife is a wonder at conserving food

 Rarely throwing anything away.

 At the beginning of one meal of reimagined leftovers

 She said to her husband “Dear, you forgot the blessing”

 He looked at her and said, “Sweetheart, if you can show me

 One item on this plate

 That hasn’t been blessed at least twice, I’ll try

 But not sure prayer will help.

 Wonder where he slept that night!

Yet, the evangelist is telling us

 minister out of our leftovers

 our fragmented time, money, clothes, and life

 Artist and poet Jan Richardson understands

 And offers this blessing over fragments

Cup your hands together,
and you will see the shape
this blessing wants to take.
Basket, bowl, vessel:
it cannot help but
hold itself open
to welcome
what comes.

This blessing
knows the secret
of the fragments
that find their way
into its keeping,
the wholeness
that may hide
in what has been
left behind,
the persistence of plenty
where there seemed
only lack.

Look into the hollows
of your hands
and ask
what wants to be
gathered there,
what abundance waits
among the scraps
that come to you,
what feast
will offer itself
from the fragments
that remain.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is not news to anyone with a social conscience

 That our urban centers are punctuated with food deserts

 Large segments of our population living over a mile away

 From large grocery stories or supermarkets

 And instead served by smaller business that sell largely

dried, processed and packaged products,

with low nutritional content.

 This is such a prevalent issue in our own state

 That there is actually a law requiring the government

 To track food deserts

 So that they can adequately be addressed

In this fragmented society and country

 There are also food deserts of a spiritual kind

 In which people’s human hungers for kindness and care

 For generosity and even God

 Are not being met.

 There is also a law that addresses this issue as well:

 It is called the great commandment, that in part reads

 Love your neighbor as yourself.

In his magical story, the Mother of Soda Bread,

 Jack Shea narrates the quest of one daughter

 To learn how her mother makes the world’s best soda bread, before her mother declines and her secret recipe disappears. So she asked "Ma, mind if I watch and take a few notes?” Her mother didn’t mind

 The next afternoon Ma gathered on the countertop all the ingredients necessary for her famous soda bread -- flour, sugar, raisins, butter and a host of ancient spice bottles hidden in the back of the cabinet. Then with a deep intake of breath like a conductor the second before a symphony, she began.

 Sarah took copious notes. Each pinch and dab and sprinkle were scribbled on her yellow pad. Later on, looking over her jottings, she was puzzled by the entry HDE. Then she remembered. That was shorthand for "hit dough with elbow." Abbreviations were needed. when Sarah's mother began to make the bread, she seemed to go into a trance. She moved gracefully, her hands swift and precise as a concert pianist's.

 The next day Sarah taped her notes to the cabinet door and began meticulously to follow the instructions. When she came to the part about elbowing the dough, she looked around to make sure she was alone. She felt a little silly, but then delivered the dough a mighty blow. No pro basketball player ever threw a better elbow.

 That night at dinner she presented her masterpiece to family with all the anxiety of a bride's first meal. Her family praised the soda bread extravagantly but also unanimously agreed that it was not as good as grandma's.

 That made Sarah more determined than ever, and sent her back for a second note-taking session.

 The next afternoon her mother began her ritual of baking. Everything was as Sarah had marked it down. She could not see where she had gone wrong. "Ma, I did everything just as you did, but it didn't turn out the same."

 "You forgot the yeast," her mother said. "You don't use yeast in soda bread," said Sarah. "You use yeast in everything," instructed her mother. "I didn't see you use it." "When I was kneading the dough, I saw all the faces of all the people who would eat it. The yeast entered the dough and made it bread."

 "What are you?" Sarah asked, laughing, "some kind of bread mystic?" Her mother smiled, but she did not deny it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Bread mystics, fragment prophets, messengers of divine nourishment

 Commissioned to vanquish the food deserts

 Of body and spirit,

 Serving the multitudes from our poverty, so becoming eucharist

 This is our hope … our life … our mission

 So we pray that we might become what we eat

 through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. I heard this story first narrated by Prof. Andrew Root at a conference in South Africa in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/07/22/gathering-the-fragments/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From John Shea, *The Spirit Master* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)