

Funeral Food

Matthew 14:13-21

Sermon notes from the Pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
6 August 2023
Matt Matthews

Funeral food.

The family gathers after their loved one dies. The news hasn't fully sunk in. Somebody says, *We need to eat*. Somebody else says, *I'm not hungry*. Somebody says, *But the kids have to eat*. *Grandma needs to eat*. *We need to have dinner*.

We've all shared those kind of awkward, holy dinners. After the family has come home from the hospital, or the graveside, or the funeral service, we feel heavy and ancient-old and sluggish-slow, and we sit down to a table laden with food.

We don't know we're hungry until we smell it. Our belly growls. The church has brought some food. Or the neighbors. Or Adam the grandson has made a run to the local pizza palace. We gather around that table. Somebody reaches out her hands at the table. Everyone pauses. We take the hands of the people near us and form a crooked circle around that table. There is a silence and a collective sigh. Children in that circle—and the dogs sitting expectantly on the floor, tails thumping—are looking up into the faces of the adults, glowing faces becoming streaked with tears. You can feel the slightest tremble of the hands you're holding, the clamminess, the fever, and the beating, throbbing rush of pulse, of life. Finally, somebody prays. Finally, somebody gathers the strength to gather a few words and set them free in a prayer. We wipe our faces, say *amen*, and somebody begins passing around the biscuits.

Food brings a kind of relief. Life will go on, and it needs to be nourished. With the food, comes the conversation. You don't talk politics or religion or sports or the economy. You talk about the connections that link you, the translucent network of memory, the family ties by blood or marriage or friendship. This collection of people may never gather again in this exact configuration. You know this. You let it sink in. You're taking nothing, nothing for granted. It's all so tenuous, so true, so deep.

You talk about the one everybody misses. At first, everybody is shy to mention his name. There's something about saying that name out loud that makes his death seem real, his life seem eternal. Soon the funeral silences and the weariness give way to the clatter of forks and knives on plates full of food. Soon, everyone is interrupting everyone else, talking with their mouths open, telling the stories, about the time when he was on that roof with a garden hose, *and What was he thinking*. With food comes revival. The biscuits and butter come around again. And the beans. And the gravy. And the ham.

It's funeral food.

You'll never remember this meal—who cooked it, or brought it, or bought it. But this meal gives strength-beyond-strength as you pass the food and talk about the one you miss, the one for whom you are forever and deeply grateful. And somebody stifles a laugh, and soon everyone is laughing. Laughter and tears, after all, are so close to the same, exact thing. And people are blowing their noses into linen dinner napkins and dabbing at their eyes, and children are falling asleep on laps, and somebody stirs sugar into a glass of iced tea.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, you want to say, but you don't. It's a song from childhood, the kind of song that once came easy but now from which you've become so distant. Far off, you remember so many voices singing it, meaning it. You remember this. You savor this—all of *this*. You don't saying anything.

You don't sing anything. You just pass the ripe cubes of watermelon, and the demolished chicken, and the wild rice casserole. And it's good. It's all so good.

Taste and see that the Lord is good, the Psalmist says. And this meal, this fellowship, this remembrance is oh-so-good, and you didn't even know you needed it. But you did. You did need it. You thought you weren't hungry. In fact, you were hungry, after all, practically famished. You needed this, all of it. Nothing can satisfy a restless crowd quite like a good meal of slow food.

* * *

The feeding of the 5,000 isn't a funeral banquet. But it might be the first food Jesus eats after the death of his cousin, John the Baptist.

That's why at the beginning of this story Jesus withdrew from the crowd to a deserted place by himself. He heard the news about John and he retreated to grieve. The crowds follow him, however, and when he comes ashore, they surround him.

Jesus did what Jesus always did: he had compassion on the crowd. He cured their sick. He visited this throng. And when it came time to eat, he told his disciples to feed them.

The disciples wanted to send the crowd into the nearby villages to get food for themselves. But Jesus would have none of that. "You give them something to eat. You do it. They're tired. Don't make them walk away so late in the day."

It wasn't a funeral meal for the crowd, but it might have been for Jesus. He might have been starving for a little life and fellowship and shared food. When you eat together you recommit yourselves to another round of living. You tap into life. You pass the food. You share. You tell stories. You laugh. And your spirit and your body become full again. Full of life.

The crowd doesn't know this, but we do: This miraculous meal is juxtaposed with Jesus' grief. Jesus wanted to feed these people. He knew life was difficult. He knew life was sacred. He had just lost his friend John. He wanted to eat with this crowd. He could bear for anyone walking away alone. He wanted to gather these people like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Life forces us to learn to grieve. And grief forces us to learn to live. That's part of what's happening with this impromptu banquet.

Here in this story of the feeding of five-thousand and here at the communion table we are reminded that with God there's always plenty. More than enough. Merciful hospitality abounds from everlasting to everlasting. And breaking bread with each other is a way of easing down the barriers that separate us. When we gather around a table, the hands go out, and we hold on for prayer, for just a moment we hold on for dear life. And the laughter and the tears see-saw together. And we pass around the food. And we talk about our day. We make sure the water glasses stay full. And we come to realize God is with us around the table. And so, we pass the biscuits and the redeye gravy and the pan-fried ham.

Jesus wanted that crowd to experience this kind of welcoming community. Jesus wanted it then, and he wants it now.

Come, brothers and sisters: Taste and see that the Lord is good!

AMEN