

LEFTOVERS APLENTY—OR NOT

Have you been to the grocery store lately? Things are really beginning to get a bit out of hand. Every week prices creep up—and quantities go down. It used to be that a gallon of ice cream was 64 ounces—but somewhere along the line it turned into 48. And since when is a pound—as in coffee—only 13 ounces?

Of course, we can still get food. Lots of food, if we can afford it. And a wide variety of food. Around the world, there are numerous spots like Darfur where there is no food to be had at any price. And in some places, like Haiti, there have even been riots, as hungry people have lost patience with governments that refuse to address the issue.

Even here in Connecticut, we are seeing evidences of a growing hunger problem. This past week it was announced that an emergency grant of \$50,000 was made to two of Connecticut's food banks by the governor's office. Food banks primarily distribute bulk quantities of food to local food pantries, who in turn distribute food directly to those in need. And Connecticut's food banks are having trouble getting supplies. The cost of fuel and rising food prices are impacting their ability to help out. And the need is growing every day. The Bridgeport Salvation Army, for instance, reported that in July alone 81 new families signed up to get free food. (*CT Post*, 7-30-08, A-1)

It was good of the governor to help out. But it's instructive to note, that the monies came from a discretionary fund. This was not a systemic answer to the growing need—it was a band-aid, if you will. A short term fix.

Some would suggest that's all that we can expect from government. Some would suggest that those who serve in political office will never have the courage to really address the problem. Some sway, no matter who is in office, it will always be the same.

One such cynic is John Hourihan. John is a columnist for the *Connecticut Post*—he also serves as the *Post*'s wire editor. I've read his columns for quite some time, now. They are usually very well written, and often laced with a bit of acid.

John was raised in an Irish Catholic family. He served in the military, and frequently draws on his own experiences. In a column he wrote in mid-July, he declared his reticence about politicians and government: "Putting faith in a change of political leadership as a way to a life with our heads above water is like betting on a fish to help us drain the lake." (*CT Post*, 7-18-08, D-1) He then goes on to tell a story illustrating how politicians and government officials

are so enmeshed in the system that they can't be counted on to change it. "If we wait for politicians to make our lives better it will be a long fruitless wait," he concludes, "WE have to help ourselves. We need to learn to swim together, or drown." (*Ibid*)

I suspect that's the point of our story from Matthew as well. Not that politicians or government officials won't help us, but rather, that we can and must be willing to help one another.

It's a familiar story. One that the gospel writers consider so important they preserve at least six different versions of it. Jesus is out in the country side healing the sick. It gets late in the day. Folks are hungry, but they are a long way from home. There are no bodegas or delis anywhere nearby. The disciples are worried about the mood of the crowd. Maybe they fear a food riot—who knows? So they ask Jesus to tell them to go home, so that they can get something to eat. "No," says Jesus, "You give them supper." But Jesus, all we have are five small loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Bring them here, he says. And have the crowd sit down. Then, in his characteristic manner, he offers up a word of thanks, breaks the bread, divvies up the fish, and has the disciples hand it out. And lo and behold, thousands of them have enough to eat. There are even some leftovers—twelve baskets full!

So does Jesus perform a miracle, here? Or is the real miracle, a miracle of the heart? I suspect that what really happens, is once the disciples get over their selfishness and share what little they have, others are inspired to reach in a pocket, or a bag, and pull out their own meager supply of food to share with their neighbors. And in the end, everybody has enough to eat.

More than enough—apparently. After all, there are twelve baskets worth of leftovers. But the leftovers point to an important lesson. Scholar Douglas Hare writes: "It is natural to think of this detail as pointing to a superabundance of God's supply, but in fact a mere twelve basketsful after many thousands have eaten suggests a very narrow margin. . . . The story suggests that God will provide with a little to spare, but there must be no greed or waste, or some will go hungry." (*Interpretation: Matthew, 167*) Now that's a sobering note! There is enough in the world to go around, but only if each one of us takes just our own fair share.

I could roll out statistics at this point. I could illustrate by talking about the huge amount of resources we use here in the United States as compared to our brothers and sisters in the developing world. But I won't. Not because they don't exist—but rather, because at some level we all know the truth: we've gotten more than our fair share. Far more. While around the world, there are many who have nothing. But I fear we don't really understand that.

Columnist Hourihan, in another column written last month, talks about a time when he went without food for well over forty-eight hours. It happened while he was in the service, and on

several connecting flights between the Far East and the States. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that he didn't have his wallet, he couldn't even buy any food. At one point he is in an airport and sees someone else eating a cheeseburger. He is so hungry at that point that he thinks about forcefully taking the cheeseburger. But he doesn't.

Hourihan thought of that episode in his life as he reflected on the food riots that have been happening around the world. And in retrospect it helped him to better understand how that could happen. When you are really hungry, really hungry, you might do anything for something to eat. "Americans," he writes, "except maybe the poorest of the poor, don't really understand hunger and what it does to you. We complain about the cost of groceries, but we are still a long way from starvation, or even from three days without food." And then he concludes, " Well, some of us are." (*CT Post*, 7-8-08, B-1)

Part of the problem, you see, is that we have a very hard time identifying with those who are hungry. We just don't know what it feels like. The folks in the story from Matthew shared their meager food supplies with one another because they all realized they were in the same boat. But we don't. We have so much, that we just don't even remember we are living in the same world as the hungry homeless men and women we served at Glide Memorial in San Francisco, not to mention those in Darfur or Haiti.

So what are we to do?

I'd like to make a suggestion. A concrete suggestion. We Protestants long ago gave up the idea of fasting. We thought it was too Catholic. But fasting, purposely going without food, has a number of purposes. One is preparing us to be open to God by giving us more time to pray. But another ancient reason for fasting is to help us identify with the poor and the hungry. So here's my idea. It's not original. It's not very radical. Why not fast from one meal a week—you pick it, and if you already skip breakfast, that doesn't count! Pick one meal you'll forego, figure out the cost of that meal, and donate the money to the Mission Board's fund for food. Those monies go to support our local food pantries. Those monies feed hungry people. And one more thought—let's not give up on the politicians. Because it will take a systemic solution to right this horrible wrong. So write a letter to Governor Rell, thank her for thinking about the hungry, and ask her what else she proposes that we do, and how you can help.

Because in the end, it's going to take more than leftovers. It's going to take a new spirit of empathy, a new willingness to share.

Amen

John H. Danner

