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Doing the impossible  
Mimico Presbyterian Church and Wesley Mimico United Church  
Aug 3, 2014  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:13-21

Sometimes, the simplest - most basic - things in life turn out to be stranger than we think. Take food for example. On the one hand, food is an essential thing that enables us to live. Food is - well - grown all around us here in the GTA. And more than that, foods from all around the planet can be acquired here in Mimico with very little effort. Food is all over the place. And I don't need to tell you about food - both of our congregations seems to understand the relationship between food, fellowship, and community.

But food is a bit strange too. For one thing, "food" is not really a "thing" at all. Different things can be called food, and we do not all agree on what is edible. Come and shop at my local Korean grocery store you will likely agree that different people have very different ideas of what the word "food" means.

Sometimes, corporations have a different idea of what food is than consumers do. And that has led to some interesting products appearing on grocery store shelves. Some of these products sell well, and others are shunned.

For example, you can take potatoes, cook them, mash them up, form the mashed potatoes into the shape of sticks, and you have "created" french fries that look as if you took a potato and just sliced it up. Many of our fast-food french fries are made this way. And for many people, that's acceptable. But what if you did the same thing with eggs? What if you took eggs, hard boiled them, separated the egg whites and the yolks and then formed them back into a longish shape with the yolk in the middle, you would have created essentially a long, loaf-shaped hard-boiled egg. That product, which is produced and eaten in Japan, somehow has not caught on here. Why is it that when we cook and reshape potatoes, people will eat them, but when we do the same things with eggs, ..... well. Has anyone here ever eaten an egg loaf?? I haven't.

Has anyone here eaten a canned cheeseburger? They exist! To prepare it you

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simply take the canned cheeseburger which looks like a can of tuna but a bit taller, put the can in boiling water for 10 minutes, then remove the top and the bottom from the can, push out the contents, and there you have it - a cheeseburger - the meat, the bun, the cheese, even the ketchup and the pickles are there. You haven't heard of those? Where do you shop??

Food is strange in other ways too. It seems strange to me that globally, enough food can be produced to allow every human being to live a reasonable life - and yet - globally - approximately 24,000 people die every day from lack of food or from related illnesses. How is that possible? I am of the opinion that it is hard to know exactly why. Some people claim that my assumption is simply wrong - that the planet cannot actually provide enough food for our ever-increasing global population. Others feel that there is enough food produced globally, however we have no effective - that is profitable - means of distribution and sales to reach the poorest residents of our planet.

Other people feel that global hunger is simply less important than other issues - like terrorism. Our media is full of stories of terrorist activities. But statistically, in the last 35 years terrorism – as our media defines it - has killed a total of approximately 16,000 people. Global hunger kills more people than that every single day.

Mark Elsis has very strong opinions on this subject. He states boldly that letting other people die of hunger is a form of murder. I quote, “This sin is mainly perpetrated by an elite few, the extremely rich and powerful megalomaniacs of the ultimate oligarchy. But the inherent greed that is allowing this daily mass murdering of our fellow human beings is based in the roots of capitalism itself. This is not very good karma for us. We must quickly put an end to our relentlessly heinous and barbaric slaughtering of our own species children.”<sup>1</sup>

Strong words indeed. But he is right that the ways that we choose to eat affects the rest of the world. Many foods are extremely intensive in their requirements for two key resources - fresh water and fossil fuels. Agriculture as we understand the term today in Canada cannot exist without massive quantities of both water and fuel. Those of us

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.starvation.net>

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who produce foods choose how to produce it, and those of us who eat food choose what to buy. And that does mean that our decisions strongly effect how possible it is for the rest of the world to eat. Our decision to eat meat - for example - requires much larger agricultural inputs in the form of fuel and water than would be required if we relied more heavily on plant-based foods.

Surely this means that the question - “can we feed the global population?” is not a sensible question. A better question would be “given the way that we currently eat, can the rest of the global population feed themselves?”. And if the answer is “No”, then the next question might be “can we find a way to feed ourselves that allows the global population to feed themselves.” Or – to use the famous question - “can we live simply in a way that allows everyone to simply live.”

Today’s gospel reading is about food. Jesus tries to escape from the crowds after the news of John’s murder - to spend some time alone - but he is followed by his disciples and by a crowd of over 5000. In some translations it says there were 5000 men, as well as women and children. In any case, it’s a big group. And from the story, we are led to imagine that none of those 5000 people thought to bring any nourishment.

We need to read this story twice, because there are at least two ways to understand what’s going on here. The problem is that the text does not actually say what Jesus did. All we are told is that a small amount of food is handed around a large group of people, and at the end, people are satisfied and there are left-overs.

The way this story is often interpreted is that somehow, when Jesus blessed the bread and the fish, something magical happened. The food was transformed in some way to somehow feed all the people. Don’t ask me what happened - it was magic. That way of reading the story is particularly powerful if we think of Jesus as God incarnate, and therefore able to do things like that. And you are of course free to read the story in this way if you choose.

The other common way to interpret the story is to imagine that the 5000 people did not in fact leave their homes without provisions. Between all the people present, there was likely enough food for all of them. But none of them - not even the disciples -

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wanted to bring out their food bundles for fear that their meagre food stock would be consumed by others, and the ones who brought the food would go hungry. Overall, there was enough food - but the crowd didn't want to risk sharing.

If we interpret the story that way, what did Jesus actually do? Did he perform a miracle? Did he do anything at all? Well, I'm inclined to think that if Jesus somehow enabled that large group to trust enough to share with each other, that was something. If Jesus was able - even in limited ways - to build community amongst strangers. That was something. That was really something. I would say that was a miracle.

Our gospel today is like a microcosm of our global situation. In the gospel - and in the world - there is enough food for everyone to eat. In the gospel - and in the world - there is fear of sharing, fear of not having enough for ourselves. Jesus's invitation into community allows the 5000 to feed themselves. The equivalent action today would end global hunger. And surely, ending global hunger would be a miracle.

What would be the bigger miracle - Jesus making bread from thin air, or Jesus helping people to share? What's harder? Today, what would be the bigger miracle - a scientific discovery that increases food production but still allows thousands of people to die every day from lack of food - or - changes in our own hearts that allow sharing at much deeper levels - sharing in a way that no one dies from lack of food. What would be the bigger miracle today?

And what miracle do we need here in Mimico? What "impossible" task should we be working on here? And how should we start working on it? When the disciples told Jesus they had only 5 loaves and 2 fish, Jesus said "well - let's get started anyway". Perhaps we just need to start too. Taking down the Berlin wall was impossible - until it happened. Ending Apartheid in South Africa was impossible - until it happened. In the words of Starship Captain Jean-Luc Picard, "Things are only impossible until they're not".

What "impossible task should we be working on here?" Remember - with the grace of God, the impossible is possible. Let's get started!

*Amen.*