
Do the impossible
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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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 Brant County. And more than that, foods from all around the planet can easily be acquired right here in Brantford. Food is all over the place. And I don't need to tell you about food - our congregation understands the relationship between food, fellowship, and community.

[image: pigs vs dogs]

But food is a bit strange too. For one thing, "food" is not really a "thing" at all. Different cultures have different ideas of what is considered edible. Many things can be called "food" by one group and called "not food at all" by another group. If you don't believe me, next time you have the chance pop into any grocery store from a culture you did not grow up with and take a look around. I think you will likely agree that different people have very different ideas of what the word "food" means. One of the most blatant examples of this is how in some cultures, people eat dogs, while here, traditionally, we eat pigs. In reality, pigs are as just sociable and loving as dogs are. And pigs are smarter than dogs. But we have been brought up to believe that eating pigs is fine, while eating dogs is not.

[image: Colgate lasagna]

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 very acceptable.

[image: egg loaf]

But what if you do the same thing with eggs? What if you take eggs, hard boil them, separate the egg whites from the yolks and then form them back into a longish shape with the yolk in the middle? You would have 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.

[image: canned cheeseburger]

Has anyone here eaten a canned cheeseburger? They do exist you know. To prepare it you simply take the canned cheeseburger which looks like a can of tuna but taller, put the can in boiling water for 10 minutes. Then you 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??

[image: strange potato chip flavours]

Today, unusual foods abound! I found this advertisement for some new potato chip flavours. I wonder what your favourite flavour would be? Would it be "wasabi ginger"? Or "Cappuccino"? Or "Mango salsa"? Or "Cheddar bacon Mac + cheese"? They all sound wonderful, don't they?

[show other images of strange foods]

[image: global hunger]

Food is strange in another way too. It seems strange to me that globally, enough food is 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. If we created a country for every human who was chronically malnourished, it would be the third most populated country in the world. Just behind China and India. How is that possible in our modern world?

Some people claim that my assumption is simply wrong. That the planet cannot in fact provide enough food for our ever-increasing global population. Others feel that there

is enough food produced globally. However we have no effective - in other words 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 loves to push 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. Global hunger is a big deal.

[image: green earth]

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.”

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 fuel. Agriculture as we understand the term today in Canada cannot exist without massive quantities of both water and fuel. Those of us who produce foods choose how to produce them, and those of us who eat food choose what to buy. And that means 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 terms of fuel and water than would be required if we relied more heavily on plant-based foods. Some studies estimate that eating 15% less meat would have the same impact to our environment as removing 240 million cars from our roads.

[image: can we live simply]

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 so that everyone to simply live.”

[image: feeding 5000]

Today’s gospel reading is about food - sort of. 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 happened. 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.

One way this story is 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. Some people imagine that Jesus turned stones into bread. The text does not say that. And remember that when Jesus was wandering in the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread, and Jesus refused. The truth is that we are not told what happened during this feeding story. But many people imagine that Jesus performed some 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. If you have your own theory as to what actually happened that day, please share it over coffee time. I’d love to hear your idea. Here - according to the Internet - is one idea of how it might have happened.

[image: Jesus orders pizza]

The other common way to interpret this feeding story is to imagine that the 5000 people did not in fact leave their homes without refreshments. The people living in Palestine 2000 years ago were not idiots. Between all the people present that day, there was likely enough food for all of them. But none of them - not even the disciples - wanted to bring out their food bundles for fear that their meagre food stocks would be

consumed by others. The people already had food. But everyone was afraid that they would go hungry. There was enough food - but nobody wanted to risk sharing and going hungry themselves.

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 amazing. 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.

[image: cats not sharing]

Our gospel today is like a microcosm of our global situation. In the gospel story - and in our world - there is enough food for everyone to eat. In the gospel story - and in our 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 same action today would end global hunger. And surely, ending global hunger would be a miracle.

[image: sharing pizza]

What would be the bigger miracle - Jesus making bread from thin air, or Jesus helping people share? Which is more difficult? Today, what would be the bigger miracle? A scientific discovery that increases global food production? Perhaps. But I suspect that even if that happened we would still allow thousands of people to die every day because we would not share well enough. The real limitation is not how much food exists. The real limitation is our own willingness to share. The miracle we need is not "out there". The miracle we need is in our own hearts. The miracle we need is to open our own hearts to allow sharing at much deeper levels. Sharing in a way that no one dies from lack of food.

Do you want Jesus to give us more food? Or do you want Jesus to open our hearts? What would be the bigger miracle today? What miracle do you yearn for today?

[image: always with you what cannot be done]

I titled this reflection "Do the impossible". I wanted to lift up the contrast between thinking that things are impossible when in fact we simply do not know how to begin. Or

perhaps - if we are honest with ourselves - we don't want to do them at all. 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". It's easy to see some task as impossible. But as Jesus told the disciples, sometimes we just need to get started.

[image: do the impossible]

What "impossible" task should we be doing here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church? What does Brantford need us to do? I love asking questions like that just before I take off on holidays. But you know that I will come back. And we will have to answer that question together as we move forward this autumn. Perhaps the answer is the same as the answer that Jesus deduced. Perhaps we as a community just need to learn to share. Not just our resources, but our hopes, our dreams, our stories, and our lives.

Do we want a miracle there? 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. What can each of us do to increase sharing in our own community? What miracle can each of us contribute to? Remember - with the grace of God, the impossible is possible. Let's get started!

Amen.