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Can you spare some change?  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
October 16, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:13-21, 25:31-46 and James 2

Today we share two classic Bible stories about food, and about feeding people. It is no coincidence that today is “World Food Sunday”. And of course, here in Canada we celebrated Thanksgiving just last weekend. How many of us enjoyed a wonderful meal with friends and family? How many of us are still full? Perhaps nobody here even wants to hear about food right now. And I’m sure that many of you are expecting a sermon about plant-based eating. Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but no. Because at some point during this reflection you will realize I’m not really talking about food at all. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

[image: no suitable image]

Let’s start with the more straight-forward story. The story of the feeding of the 5000 people. It is such a classic story. But like any good, well-known story, there are multiple ways to understand the story. I count at least four, and perhaps you know others. The four views of the story come from the fact that nothing in the story explains what actually happened. In particular, the story does not tell us what Jesus actually does. And that gives us space to put ourselves into the story in different ways. Let’s see if I can remember all four.

[image: rocks into bread]

One way to read the story is that it was a miracle. Jesus waved his magic wand and food appeared. But the story in Matthew does not say that. The story does not say - for example - that Jesus turned rocks into bread. If you think that Jesus turned rocks into bread, you might be thinking of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. And in that story, Jesus refused to turn rocks into bread. In Matthew, it is simply unclear what happened. Actually, the miracle that I always wondered about is where did they find the 12 baskets for the leftovers? I mean, who carries empty baskets around when there is no Costco in sight?

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[image: eating hamburger]

Another way to read the story is to realize that people are not stupid. And certainly not when it comes to food. If people followed Jesus into a deserted place, they would have all brought food themselves. Everyone was fed because they had all brought food themselves.

[image: sharing]

A third way to read the story is similar, but to imaging that perhaps not everyone had brought food. Some people brought food and some did not. There was enough food in total. And the miracle that happened was that somehow Jesus encouraged those who had brought food to share with those who had not brought anything. To me, that is the most miraculous way to understand the story anyway. Especially given that today we face a similar dilemma. There is enough food to feed the entire planet with healthy nutritious food, but we have a big problem sharing. Which is how it comes to be that today approximately 1 billion people are malnourished and 1 billion people are obese and overweight.

[image: communion]

And what is a fourth way to read the story? A fourth way is to read the story as an analog. In the story, the way that Jesus hands out bread and fish most closely resembles a communion distribution. "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds." That sounds a lot like the words I used during the communion we had here just last week. Perhaps the story is really an analog of Jesus sharing his ministry. The story is a representation of communion. And the 12 baskets perhaps represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

[image: perhaps it's not about food]

How do you like to read the story? Perhaps some of you have another way to read the story? If so, please talk to me over coffee time. For me - as always - the important question is - how can we read the story in a way that is most meaningful to us today? And perhaps the most meaningful way to read the story is to start by realizing that it is not about food. At all. Perhaps food was just an example of something broader, an example

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that people in Jesus's day could relate to. But why on earth is Rev. Paul suggesting that a story about feeding people is not about food?

[image: corn flakes comes with an ordination certificate]

Are you starting to wonder if I got my ordination certificate in a box of Corn Flakes?

Well, I won't answer that question right now. Instead, I want to discuss the other story. The perhaps even more famous story of the sheep and the goats.

But first, on a completely-unrelated note, I have an opportunity for you all. This week I went online and bought 2 tickets, which I want to raffle off right now.

[image: trudeau at Timmies]

The first ticket gives you a 20 minute meeting over coffee at the Tim Hortons on West and Dundas with our Prime Minister. With this ticket, you will have the honour of buying a coffee for the Prime Minister. Where shall we start the bidding? [fake bidding happens]. Great.

[image: no image required .... You can just go see this yourself anytime you like]

Now the other ticket gives you a 20 minute meeting over coffee at the same location with one of the people who live on the streets of Brantford. With this ticket, you will have the honour of buying coffee for a person of unknown status. Where shall we start the bidding? Wait - are you saying you would rather buy a coffee for a person of status and power than buy a coffee for a person with no status or power? You do know that the person with status can buy their own coffee, right? Interesting.

[image: sheep and goats]

Now - our second story. In the story, Jesus separates people into two groups - metaphorically. Sheep and goats. We have all heard this story so many times we might have let the story just drift over us when Terry was reading it.

But I want to ask - what is it - really - that separates the sheep from the goats. The way we often talk about this story, something you have likely heard many times, is that the sheep feed, clothe, and generally help poor disadvantaged people. The goats - on the other hand - did not feed, clothe, and generally help poor disadvantaged people. But you already know that message.

Today, I want to suggest a different way to see this story. OK - it's a small

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difference. Consider this. The sheep and the goats all feed people, clothe people, and generally help people. The goats were accused of not feeding disadvantaged people. But they were busy feeding other people. For example, people of status and wealth.

What makes a person a sheep or a goat is NOT whether or not you feed people. It's a question of who you choose to feed. And beyond that, it's a question of who is it that you even recognize in your midst.

What makes you a sheep or a goat is NOT how you behave. What makes you a sheep or a goat is who you are able to see, recognize, and consider part of your society. Do you (like the goats) only recognize people with power and status? Or do you (like the sheep) recognize as part of our own society everyone, including people who are disadvantaged.

That's why the sheep had to ask "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" The sheep fed everybody, and sometimes, Jesus was present in their midst through hungry people. The goats on the other hand, never fed hungry people. They fed people of power, people of influence. That's why the goats ask the same question, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Goats actually fail to see hungry people in our midst.

The problem with the goats is not that they were not generous. But they were only generous to people of status, wealth, and power. They did not recognize Jesus in their midst when the person right in front of them had no status.

[image: Godspell sheep and goats]

I think it is in the musical, Godspell, where the disciples say, "Lord, if we had known it was you, we would have treated you better". If the goats had known that a person of status was present, of course they would have fed them. Jesus says that people of status can take care of themselves. Sheep have more important work to do helping people who actually need help.

Or - to be far too blunt - sheep would have paid a lot for the second ticket I was raffling off, and would not have cared about the first ticket at all. Sheep would say, "Let the PM buy his own coffee, I'm too busy buying coffee for someone who actually needs

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it.”

And here’s good news for today. I do not of course actually have any tickets to sell. But we do not need tickets - or anyone’s permission - to go into our own community. To find someone who looks hungry or thirsty. And without needing anyone's permission, you are free to buy some food and then share your meal, your time, your heart, perhaps even your life with that person. You have nothing to lose but an hour and a few dollars. You have nothing to gain but new life, the kingdom of God, salvation, and stuff like that that ministers always drone on about.

As it says in James “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:15-16). We are called to act out our love, not to judge and then ignore people without status.

[image: brantford city hall]

There are so many applications of this message that we as a Canadian society should all embrace. But I suppose I should not talk about that today, given that our municipal elections are coming up so soon. I would not want to say anything political. I would not want to bias any of you. I would not want to accidentally mention that giving tax breaks to the rich makes you a goat or perhaps some other animal that has horns. I certainly do not want to say that subsidizing wealthy corporations makes you a goat. I definitely would not want to slip up and say that taking money from the poor to feed the wealthy is a goat move. I don’t want to talk about that stuff at all today. So let me just invite us to hope and pray that our next municipal government is one that not only talks good, but does good too. Particularly for and with those with limited power and status.

Moreover, what do we think of the “laundry list” that separates sheep from goats? And how does that list apply to us here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church in 2022? In our story, the actions that sheep are expected to do are:

[image: summary of the list below]

- Feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty - we have lots of food insecurity issues right here in Brantford. And our outreach team is currently making 200 sandwiches every week for handing out downtown.

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- Welcome strangers - we have lots of new immigrants and recent refugees here. Here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church we are one of the partners in the Brantford Immigration Partnership.
  - Provide clothing to the naked - I do invite people to rummage through our collection of clothing we have in the church.
  - Take care of the sick - Carol, some of the people on the Pastoral Care committee, and I do make hospital visits.
  - Visit people in prison - It's too bad that the Brantford Jail closed in 2017. But I have made visits to Maplehurst Correctional Facility since I've been here.

What do you think of that list? Presumably, that list was meaningful in Jesus's time and place. But I would encourage us all to imagine beyond that list. Are there things on that list that we no longer need to do? Are there other activities we would add to the list? For Brantford. For 2022.

[image: what would we add or delete from that list today?]

[discuss and ask]

Don't worry, I can hear the murmurs from here. We are small. We are poor. We are old. We are weak. Rev. Paul is nuts. What are we really expected to do here in Brantford, in 2022 beyond what we are already doing? Well, that is our reality to some extent. And certainly, we need to be realistic about how much energy we have as a congregation. But we still get to decide how to use that energy. And I want to leave you with 2 gifts. One from Jesus, and one from mathematics.

In the story of the feeding of the 5000, after Jesus suggests that the disciples should feed the group, "They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish'." And how did Jesus respond? Jesus said, well, get started anyway. Start with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Do not think about whether you have enough, just begin. Now. That message applies to us today. And obviously, it's application goes well beyond food.

And here is the gift from mathematics. If we think we are small and have nothing to contribute, consider this:

If we make our "normal" effort of 100% to reach out to others, and we do that every day, in 1 year we will likely be doing exactly what we are doing today. That's what

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status quo means. Mathematically, we can express this as

$$1.000^{365} = 1.00$$

But what if we can imagine making a very small extra effort, perhaps only 0.1%. We could all probably do that, right? If you can make 0.1% additional effort every day (0.1% more than the day before), after a year, we actually get somewhere.

$$1.001^{365} = 1.44$$

With a 0.1% extra effort every day - and the compounding effect, that 0.1% per day leads to an increase by the end of the year of 44%. Not bad, right?

The phrase used to be “brother, can you spare a dime?” Today I want to ask “brothers and sisters, can you think of others 0.1% more every day?” Can you spare some change? Specifically, can you spare a change of 0.1%? That is enough to get started. Let’s go!

*Amen.*