

## Luke 9:12-17

The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.' But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.' For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, 'Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.' They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

### **“Leftovers”**

Leftovers—I have to confess that growing up, this was the one part of the Thanksgiving holiday that I did not look forward to.

Looking back, I think I loved just about every other aspect of Thanksgiving. I loved getting time off from school, and not having to worry about homework for a few precious days. I loved the way the house smelled all day, as Mom and Dad worked away in the kitchen. I loved helping to set the dinner table with special plates and decorated napkins—that was usually the only task I could be trusted to handle without accidentally burning something. I loved the fact that my family was all gathered around the table to share food, memories, and laughter. Even if I was forced to sit at “the kid’s table,” I loved the way I felt so grown up drinking sparkling grape juice.

And then there was the meal itself—especially the turkey. Cooked to perfection, it was something I looked forward to all day.

But then Thanksgiving Day would come to a close. The table would be cleared, the dishes cleaned, and the leftovers would be bagged up or covered in plastic wrap.

And every day after that, for every meal, we would have leftovers. What’s for lunch? Turkey! What’s for dinner? Turkey! Hungry for a light snack? How about some turkey? Soon, the delicious food I had looked forward to so much in the days leading up to Thanksgiving—had now become a burden.

And once the turkey was gone, the only things remaining were the unpopular foods—the ones I was too picky to eat on Thanksgiving Day itself. The fridge would be full of cranberry sauce, green beans, and gravy.

And so, being a picky eater, and not yet very practiced in the spiritual discipline of gratitude, I would complain—“Leftovers? Not again! Can’t we have something better to eat? Can’t we go to McDonalds instead?”

Eventually, these leftovers would get pushed to the back of the refrigerator in favor of new foods and different flavors. Out of sight and out of mind, the leftovers of Thanksgiving would sit, forgotten. While my parents did the best they could to get us to eat down these leftovers, ultimately some of these forgotten foods would be thrown out.

Now, these days I am the opposite of a picky eater and I have a much healthier and more appreciative perspective about leftovers, but as we prepare for Thanksgiving Day I have to wonder—how will we treat the leftovers in our lives?

And of course, I'm not talking about leftover food—although food waste is certainly something we should be concerned about. I'm referring to the people in our lives who get the leftovers of our attention. The relationships we don't make time for. The strange-looking strangers we skip over—time and time again.

The reason I think about these leftover people, is because those are the kinds of people who gathered around Jesus throughout the gospel of Luke. The people who sought out Jesus were the leftovers of society.

The poor and the hungry that were looked down upon by the wealthy and powerful. The sinners and the tax collectors who were cast aside by properly religious folk. The women and children—who were kept out of sight and out of mind. The immigrants and the foreigners who were eyed with suspicion by those that thought they'd stuck around past their expiration date. The sick and the dying—those who were cut off from society until they were eventually forgotten.

These leftover people were the ones that sought out Jesus—and they are the ones that Jesus lifted up and cared for.

These leftover people formed the crowd of over 5000 who followed him that day—in the story we just heard. They followed him because they needed to hear good news of great joy. They followed him because they found healing in his presence. They followed him because they were hungry.

But that was a problem—because there was too many people and there wasn't any food—at least, according to Jesus' disciples. All twelve of them went up to Jesus to tell him to send the crowd of people home—maybe because they were afraid of what would happen if a crowd that size started to get hangry.

Or maybe it was because they couldn't imagine what it would take to care for that many people. Or, maybe they were just treating the crowd as everyone else did—people to be pushed aside, out of sight, forgotten, and gotten rid of. Leftovers.

As I mentioned before—as I have grown up and become less of a picky eater and hopefully more appreciative and grateful, I now know that leftovers don't just take up space in the fridge or the counter top, and they certainly aren't meant to be forgotten. Leftovers are the gift that keep on giving. Leftovers are just as important as any other meal. They can even do more than keep us fed without having to cook something from scratch. Some might even call them the best part of Thanksgiving.

Leftovers can be sacred. I discovered that the first Thanksgiving I spent with my wife's family. Each year, her grandma brings (among other things) a bag of wonder-bread and a jar of Hellman's mayonnaise.

The day after Thanksgiving, sandwiches are carefully and lovingly prepared—two slices of wonder-bread, mayonnaise evenly covering them, with several slices of light meat in between. And a handful of potato chips on the side.

I quickly learned that Thanksgiving isn't over until this ritual is complete. It is a holy moment, and a reminder that thanksgiving isn't just a once a year event—it is a way of life, a way of approaching our whole lives.

Leftovers—from Thanksgiving or from any other day of the year, can become reminders of God’s abundant love in our lives. They invite us to participate in the ongoing act of Thanksgiving.

That is what Jesus did, in the story we heard. He didn’t listen to the disciples and dismiss the crowds of leftover people. Jesus saw them as God saw them—as beloved children, worthy of dignity and honor. Jesus treated them with care and compassion. Because Jesus knew—the grace and love of God is so abundant, that there is always more than enough to go around. No one is forgotten, no one is overlooked. God’s grace and love is extended to all people, no matter what.

And so Jesus treated them with care and compassion. He saw them as worthy of honor and love. He saw his mission as being part of what God was and is always doing in the world—caring for the last and the least, bringing liberation and new life. And he invited his disciples to participate in that activity. He looked at them and said, “You give them something to eat. You feed them.” Jesus wanted his disciples to see that they cannot distance themselves from the rest of the world. They cannot be focused on their own well-being and disregard the needs of the hurting world around them.

So Jesus invited his disciples to be active and involved in the feeding of the hungry crowds. He instructed them to sit in groups of 50. After blessing and breaking bread, he gave it to his disciples to distribute throughout the multitude. And at the end of the day, you remember what they had? Leftovers. 12 baskets full. More than enough for each of them.

And as people of faith, we remember that the same invitation the disciples received is extended to us today. When we encounter the leftover people in our lives, we hear the words of Jesus echoing in our hearts and minds—“You give them something to eat.” All of us are invited to participate with God in bringing abundant grace to the world.

That’s what we do during Thanksgiving, isn’t it? When we gather together with those who are hungry, just like we are, we are sharing God’s gifts. And when we celebrate all that we are thankful for—even the leftovers—it is a recognition of the abundant gifts of God.

God’s grace isn’t just for our personal benefit—grace is something we share. Grace connects all of us—we are all caught up in the abundant grace and love of God. Grace lifts us up and reveals who we really are—we are God’s beloved children, just like all the hungry people in that crowd of over 5000. God looks on us with compassion and care. And God empowers us to give thanks—to look upon one another and all people with that same compassion, and to care for the common good.

And so I give thanks for this community. I give thanks for this Ministerial Alliance, and the lives that it touches. I give thanks for all the ways that God’s grace works through every one of you. Because you remind me that God’s abundant love is all around me.

As I celebrate Thanksgiving with my family—this Thursday—and for the days and weeks after—I will give thanks for the abundance that we all share. Because there is more than enough of God’s love to go around. With leftovers to spare.