

“The Best Meal Ever!”

John 6:1-14

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’

A few years ago, Staci and I were in St. Paul, Minnesota for a conference. We decided to check out the highly recommended restaurant, W.A. Frost & Company. It did not disappoint.

Staci and I had what she called a “beautiful dining experience”. She is right, it wasn’t just a meal, it was a beautiful dining experience. We were seated in their outdoor garden area, which came complete with a summer kitchen and bar. The waiter was helpful in recommending small plate appetizers paired with their wine selection.

Our main course followed with the dessert cart eventually arriving. We shared dessert and had coffee to top off the evening. We were not rushed by the wait staff, so we could savor all the delicious food. It was one of the best meals I have ever eaten, and the most expensive, and I would highly recommend it to you.

But was it the best meal I have eaten? While I would say it was certainly in the top 3, it would not be the best ever. I might reserve that title to a little Chicago pizza joint off of West Wacker Street.

I was fresh out of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and serving my first ordained church in Peotone, Illinois. Located on the far Southside of Chicago, just outside of the Cook County line, and a few miles south of the last stop on

the commuter train line, the tiny village and small membership church were about the size of both Cambridge and OCPC.

As a young pastor, in a small membership church, it was wonderful to have some young adult members, who like me, had just graduated from college and were living at home with their parents, while taking the commuter train into Chicago for their jobs. They became my tour guides in the big city.

On this particular occasion, a small group of us made our way north into the city. We visited several places of Chicago fame: The Wrigley Building, the Billy Goat Tavern, Grant Park, and several nightclubs used in 1980 movies. They took me to this little pizza place on West Wacker for some of Chicago's famous pizza.

I cannot say it was a "beautiful dining experience" like W.A. Frost and Company. It was a pizza joint. Yet, there was something about being with those young people, new to me, who welcomed me around that table, shared their stories, made me laugh, and offered up some outstanding pizza. Like the pizza, we were stuffed. As we pushed away from the table to continue our adventure around downtown, the wait staff packed up our leftovers for us. Their pizza was just too good to leave behind.

It was a late summer afternoon, and soon carrying the box of leftover pizza was a hassle. As delicious as it was, we were not going to eat anymore or take it home with us, so we tossed it in a trash can, and continued on our way.

Maybe because it was my first taste of real Chicago pizza, coupled with the company, I would say that was the best meal I ever ate.

As we walked on, I saw a gentleman who I had not noticed before, slip out of a doorway, walk over to the trash can where we had just deposited the box of leftover pizza, retrieve it, and slip back into the doorway with it. I stopped for a moment and watched as he opened it up and began to eat the remnants of the best meal I had ever eaten. As I stood watching, I wondered if perhaps this gentleman, perhaps the Christ himself, thought like me, that it was the best meal he had ever eaten?

I was reminded of that meal when reading the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

Hungry, Jesus told the disciples to feed the people. Financial resources were scarce for purchasing food for so many. All that was available to them was what a little boy had to offer, a couple of fish and 5 loaves of bread. It would be more than enough. Jesus blessed the fish and loaves, and the disciples served them their meal.

When people were done eating, as the writer of John says, "When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that

nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets."

Do you ever wonder what became of those leftovers? I wonder if the disciples, like we did with our leftover pizza, gathered them up and then as they followed Jesus along the way, discarded them, only to see people, still hungering for more, retrieve them for their next meal?

There has to be a story there, one if we knew it, we would love to tell just as we love to share this tale of the feeding of the multitude and the little boy who shared what he had with him.

I wonder if those who shared in this meal, thought it the best one they had ever eaten?

If you were to finish this story with what the disciples did with the leftovers, how would you tell it?

The best meal ever? Perhaps that was also what the boy in the story had in mind with what he was going to do with the two fish and five loaves of barley bread. Maybe he was on his way home to feed his family their best meal ever, because it was going to be one, even as a small child, he could simply offer to them? And then, he wanders into the crowd, and is asked to share what he has with all the others who are hungry. He does so, but was he gracious in doing so? Hesitant in his sharing? After all, it was meant for someone else and not these people? If you were him, how might you tell this story?

I think of that little boy when I recall the story of another young boy who offered to share bread with us. You might recall his name was Charlie.

We were gathered for a meal, this one the Joyful Feast of the People of God. We had King's Hawaiian bread for our meal. Cheryl Stitz was helping me serve communion that morning. Charlie, sitting with his mother, Elaine, watched, and then got up, came forward to the table and took the other half of the loaf from the plate, and stood between Cheryl and me.

I asked him if he wanted to help us, and he did. So I broke off bread, handed it to him, reminded him of the words we offer "The bread of heaven, broken for you", and he in turn, offered us the body of Christ.

Now that I think about it, that may have been the best meal ever.

Amen.