

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – July 31, 2005  
“More Than Enough”

Matthew 14:13-21  
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On a hot summer day in 1973, we drove down the dusty road to Cherry Creek, a tiny Lakota village that sits on the banks of the Cheyenne River, not far from the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre. Our mission that day was to give thanks to God for the long and faithful life of the Reverend Moses Flying By. A Congregational minister most of his adult life, Moses Flying By had the wisdom of Solomon, the voice of Elijah, and the compassion of Jesus. After the worship service, we buried his body in a cemetery across the road. We took turns on the long-handled shovel. I remember the sound of the earth striking the rough pine box. I remember the high-pitched sound of the women wailing a traditional death chant. I remember handing the shovel to the next mourner for his turn in the burial ritual.

Walking back over to the Cherry Creek Congregational Church, we moved along a table of food, filling our plates with fry bread, buffalo meat, potato salad, and wojape. When everyone had been fed, maybe 500 people including women and children, Jenny Hunt came up to me and said something that I've never forgotten. She asked, “Reverend Allen, where is your wateche pot?” I gave her the blank stare of incomprehension. Wateche pot? She said, “For taking some of the leftover food home with you.” She said, “It’s our custom.” I was learning that it wasn’t enough to feed the mourners that one meal. The ancient custom is to provide food for the journey home as well. That whole scene, the day we buried Reverend Flying By, is etched on my brain.

When we read the verses in Matthew that immediately precede the Feeding of the Five Thousand, we see that Jesus and his friends are in mourning. John the Baptist has been slain. His head has been presented to Herodias on a platter, as per her request. Receiving that news, Jesus retreated to a place apart where he could grieve. The crowd heard about the death and the people sought him out as if to comfort him. He spent the day with them, healing their illnesses, touching their wounds, being their bread.

As evening came, the disciples urged him to send the people into the villages where they might buy some food for their supper. But, like Jenny Hunt, not wanting to send them away hungry, wanting them to have food for the journey, he asked everyone in the crowd to produce their wateche pots! The disciples could see only a few hunks of fry bread and a couple of large mouth bass. They were like I was that hot summer day in 1973, unaware of the spiritual obligation to feed the guests an extra meal, a meal for the road, a meal for that deeper hunger that returns all too soon.

Since that first summer of student ministry in 1973, I have learned a few things about the hunger of a mourner. I have learned through my own personal experiences of grieving and I have learned because the members of three congregations have taught me about this hunger. I often wish it were as simple as everyone producing their wateche pot and filling it with buffalo stew.

So I want to talk this morning about the food we need for grieving. I can think of at least three food groups. The first is what I call the invitation to tell the person's story as many times as it takes. It's not enough to tell your mother's story once or your father's twice or your offspring's three times. There is a hunger to tell it until...until the well of tears runs dry. This is where you find out who your real friends are! An acquaintance may say, 'Oh no, not that story again!' But a true friend says, 'Oh yes! Let's hear about Uncle Frank's post card collection one more time.'

I picture Jesus hungry for someone on that hillside to ask him about how it was between him and John the Baptist. 'Tell us about your baptism day!' And then he could relate once again how it felt to be immersed under the Jordan's waters, how it felt to come splashing up again in the grip of this strong man, how it felt to be hugged by a hairy, grasshopper-eating wilderness man. I was thinking about the 5000 people in that crowd. Maybe, if Jesus could tell each one of them, one at a time, the story of how he loved his friend, John, maybe that would be enough times!

I remember Dana Brome, whom I barely knew at the time, 11 years ago, coming up to me and asking if I wanted to go get a sandwich, maybe a beer; he'd like to hear about my dad. He probably doesn't remember that day. I do. It was the food I needed for my journey home.

Another food group is what I call ‘unsolicited food.’ We are not well coached in our culture when it comes to knowing what to say to a grieving family. I often overhear people saying things that sound like: “Let me know if there’s anything you need.” “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” This is not food for the mourner. This is a burden. When we’re grieving, we don’t have energy – not even energy to pick up the phone and order a pizza to be delivered – much less to pick up the phone and ask someone to come and help with a particular task.

The real food is the food that just gets delivered, magically! You go to the door; open it; there’s an apple pie sitting on the doorstep!

A neighbor knocks on the door, comes inside, and announces she has a reservation for two at the manicure shop or at Max on Main or at some other place of sheer delight.

I know a woman who, after shopping all morning for just the right sympathy card, fled the Hallmark store and showed up at her friend’s house with a bucket and a mop and a big box of Spic and Span! “Hi,” she said, “I’m here to scrub your kitchen floor!” This is the kind of food that fits nicely into anyone’s wateche pot! It’s food for the journey through grief. I call it the ‘unsolicited food.’

The third food group I know about is what I call the ‘familiar food.’ Grieving isn’t the time for hatching a new scheme. That day will come. But first the food that is extraordinarily familiar! This is the food that heals.

When we came to church for Warren Jackson’s memorial service, we sang what is known as the Navy Hymn. We heard those familiar measures and then we sang those familiar words:

“Eternal Father strong to save  
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,  
Who biddst the mighty ocean deep  
Its own appointed limits keep,  
O hear us when we cry to thee  
For those in peril on the sea.”

Some other less familiar hymn would have left us all hungry.

I find that when I attend a funeral as a mourner I'm glad to hear Psalm 23 in the King James Version. I'm fed when I hear "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me."  
It's familiar, and I want a second helping. I want some for my wateche pot!

On the evening before my dad's funeral, about a million relatives sat in our living room remembering stories. It was my sister-in-law, Sally, who started to read,

"When I see birches bend to left or right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them."

It was like a waitress had arrived with a mountain of pasta.  
She just knew what was familiar.

When Red Nixon died at Lancaster Memorial Hospital, I walked over to the home on Monroe Street to tell Verna that the end had come. We chatted a few minutes. I offered a prayer. When the Amen rolled off my tongue, she commenced to pray the Lord's Prayer. I joined in. Then she proceeded to recite the Apostle's Creed, that ancient statement of faith she had learned by heart as a girl. It's what was familiar. It was in the 'familiar food group.' It was her comfort food.

What I find is that grief produces a terrible hunger, a spiritual hunger, a hungering for invitations to tell the story of our loved one, one more time; a hungering for someone to just show up with a mop or a dust rag or whatever it is we need but don't have the energy to ask for; a hungering for what is familiar, for what is ridiculously familiar.

What I know is that when this kind of food is served up to people with that kind of hunger, it seems as if 5000 people are well fed and that there are likely to be twelve wateche pots of leftovers! In the greatest of hope, Amen!