

Jesus and the Loaves and Two Fish
A Thanksgiving Story
John 6.1-14
July 26, 2015
Pentecost +9

Marjorie hosted the family every year for Thanksgiving. It had always been that way and wasn't changing anytime soon. Some of the out-of-town family stayed with her, so by 8 a.m. she had already fed 8 people a feast of bacon and eggs and was brewing the second pot of coffee. As soon as the Macy's parade came on, the second wave would arrive. She arranged a platter of sausage biscuits and ham biscuits, a bowl of fruit salad with all of the melons prepared in round bites with a little jar of toothpicks on the side, and she decided at the last minute to put out a tray of cheese straws, too.

Clay walked in and said, "Nancy just texted to say she can make it after all." At which Marjorie immediately turned and reached deep into the low cabinets for a second coffee maker. Nancy only liked Southern Pecan, and Marjorie was always prepared. Most of the house guests hovered around waiting for the beep of the second pot of regular coffee before settling in to watch the parade and provide their usual commentary. "It's so cold. Who would stand out there all night in the cold to watch this?" "I love when the Broadway shows come through." "Ooh! Here comes the first balloon!"

Judie, Lynn, Flora, and Ann came in to help Marjorie. They all grabbed aprons and got their instructions: the dressing was upstairs in a second refrigerator in a closet—two casserole dishes, green beans, lima beans, cream corn, squash, and sweet potatoes were all ready to prep and steam, bake, or sauté. Desserts needed a designated place, the sideboard was ready to be arranged for serving, and the big table needed to be set. The card table was outside in the shed, and this year she'd bought a new lightweight folding table because Ken and Mag and their kids had all come. The group set to work arranging, moving furniture out of the way, smoothing table cloths and pulling out china and flatware.

Scott and Mona took turns welcoming people at the door. Coats and bags went in the downstairs bedroom, Clay started a third pot of regular coffee while the Southern Pecan's aroma merely filled the room waiting for Nancy. Darrell and Kathy arrived, and they'd decided to bring a big green salad because they knew how much bread and dessert there would be. Marjorie squeezed it into the refrigerator and handed them their coffee cups, shooing them toward the parade.

Tim was smoking a turkey this year, and he was sure to arrive soon. He'd tried to fry one last year, and everyone was so excited, but he was in a hurry and dropped the turkey too fast into the oil and burned the garage to the ground. So Katie bought him a smoker for Father's Day, and they were eager to try again.

Marjorie floated effortlessly. She knew just how long it would take to prepare the meal, she instinctively moved from whipping butter into sweet potatoes to adding salt and pepper to a pot of beans to refilling the tray of sausage biscuits and ham biscuits from the warming drawer. She'd set out all of her serving trays, bowls, platters, boats, and polished a couple dozen silver serving spoons the night before. She always did that prep work at night while most of the guests were asleep. She loved to stand in the kitchen with just one light on while the house was quiet. As she touched each piece for the next day's meal, she remembered the family and friends who gave certain pieces as wedding gifts. Others were passed down from her mother and her aunts. So many hands had polished and prepared before her. She always felt like they were with her, somehow, as she arranged the silver in her mother's pattern, the crystal from her aunt, the china from her late husband's family and the china they'd used as a family for 50 years.

The doorbell rang, and everyone looked around. Who would ring the doorbell? Scott returned to his post only to be shocked to see Harry and Margaret standing there with big smiles on their faces and some kind of casserole. "Surprise!" they shouted in unison. Surprise, indeed. Mona went to tell Marjorie that there'd be two more for dinner. Not a problem. There was another card table in the top of a closet upstairs off of the hall, and Judie sent Mary Dan and Lynn to arrange the room for a few more.

Marjorie reached into the deep freeze and pulled out two more tubes of creamed corn, the kind that looks like a roll of sausage but is really fully cooked corn ready to be thawed out. She suspected something like this might happen, so she was prepared. She also grabbed four round, aluminum trays in clear, plastic bags of Sister Schubert rolls before heading back into the kitchen. By now, Nancy and two van loads arrived: Jacob and Jared, Rosemarie, and Linda with a half dozen tween and teenage nieces and nephews. With them also came the chocolate pound cake, the ambrosia, and the cherry coke salad with cream cheese and pecans. First, hugs and kisses and "look how tall you are!" all around, then coffee. Nancy could smell her Southern Pecan while Clay started the fourth pot of regular.

The kids ran to see the cousins already waiting for them in front of the parade, and Rosemarie set to work cracking ice from trays and, with a little direction from Marjorie, started filling pitchers with sweet tea, water, and a mystery punch that sat in the fridge for two days before serving. No one quite knew what Marjorie put in it, but everyone knew *that* one was only for the grown-ups.

Tim and Katie and their four boys arrived, and the smell of smoked turkey filled the house. You could see from Tim's face (and Katie's relief) that the smoker was a huge success. The timing of the turkey meant the Sister Schubert's needed to go into the oven as the sides all began to make their way from pots to bowls and stands and platters. The sideboard was completely covered, a desk and hutch turned into a dessert and beverage station, and the rest would go down the middle of the big table like a buffet.

Paul had been sleeping in the big reclining chair but woke up to the smell of smoked turkey. He refilled his cup of coffee and then began to count. How had all of these people

gotten here? When in the world did Harry and Margaret arrive? He started to count, but people kept moving. Was it 30? 35? Did Marjorie realize there were this many people in her house? Just as the thought passed through his mind, Bob and Linda arrived along with Joe, Madeleine, Tom and Jane. At that sight, Paul went to find Marjorie. "Did you know all of the cousins were coming? Do you have room for this many people? You must have 40 people in the house right now!"

Marjorie turned to Paul, "Oh, good! They didn't think they could make it, but they did! Why don't you be a dear and go into the kitchen and make a batch of cornbread. No one can make it quite like you do." Paul sighed and moved toward the kitchen. He should have pretended to remain sleeping in the recliner. Marjorie followed the sounds of laughter and reunions. How wonderful that Bob and Linda had brought everyone! She hugged all the necks and then picked up the morning's empty biscuit tray to get it ready for rolls and cornbread.

Judie and Mary Dan were concerned about where all of these people were going to sit. Even with the extra table, they were beyond capacity and out of china. "No problem," said Marjorie as she reached deep into another bottom cabinet and pulled out what looked like a stack of round, rattan plates. Then she reached in another cabinet and grabbed a stack of paper plates. Ann walked in to witness this scene and gasped, "Paper plates! We can't serve people on paper plates!" Marjorie just smiled and said, "That's what the plate holders are for—to make them fancy! The kids can eat off of these." With that, she handed the plates and rattan holders to Ann and instructed her to put two paper plates in each holder so they could withstand all of the food from the impending feast.

Paul stuck the cornbread in the oven and moved the Schubert's to the warming drawer. The dressing was ready, the sweet potatoes with the marshmallows on top were almost turning brown, the desserts were abundant. Someone had added a caramel cake to the spread. "Who brought a caramel cake?" Marjorie wondered out loud. "Who are all these people?" Paul offered in response.

Marjorie looked around and realized Paul was right. Most of them she expected, and at least 8 (or was it 10?) were unexpected but familiar, but there was a group in the corner of the living room laughing loudly and telling stories, and Marjorie couldn't figure out who they were. Then Joseph turned his head, and she realized he was home from college. Joseph, a favorite grandson, had made his way home for thanksgiving. Marjorie rushed to him and gave him a kiss as he hugged her in delight. "Grandma, I brought a few friends from school who didn't have a place to go for Thanksgiving. I knew you wouldn't mind." And she didn't. She never did. There was always room for one more, or 12 more, or however many more it was at this point. She always welcomed people into her home, and especially to her table. There was always enough to eat, enough to share, and some left over. It kind of amazed her how it worked out that way every time.

It was time to put the last of everything out on the tables. The kitchen would have to hold some of the sides. Who brought baked beans? Marjorie never serves baked beans. Nevertheless, a crockpot of baked beans was plugged in next to Nancy's Southern Pecan,

and Marjorie just shrugged. There was Tim's turkey and a back-up Honeybaked Ham Marjorie had ordered just in case the turkey caught fire again. Good thing she did now that a dozen (was it just a dozen? was it 20?) extra people had arrived. Bowls of corn, beans, and peas. Baskets of Sister Schubert's and two platters of hot cornbread. Sweet Paul had made a double batch. The green salad from Darrell and Kathy. The cakes and other desserts. Tea, lemonade, water, and mystery punch for the grown-ups. And one more pot of regular coffee. Santa Claus was entering Herald Square in front of Macy's. Everything was ready.

Marjorie walked around the tables one last time and lit candles—tall tapers, wide pillars, small votives. Every table had candles and flowers, cloth napkins and white tablecloths. There was food on every surface. "Who brought broccoli casserole?" she wondered. "I hadn't noticed that in here before." Marjorie called them all together, and they couldn't all fit in one space. The living room flowed into the kitchen, and the kitchen flowed into the dining room. Tables and chairs were everywhere, the tv now silent. Adults, teenagers, and children stood close enough to hear each other's breath. They all looked around as they waited for the blessing. Cousins giggled and poked each other a little too hard in the ribs. Loved ones smiled at each other in the knowing silence. The college newcomers awkwardly squeezed in beside people they didn't know. They would never have another Thanksgiving exactly like this one with exactly this mix of people. Was it 50 now? More? Surely a record for Marjorie's house.

You could almost hear their thoughts as everyone looked around the room. Would talk of politics come up as they passed the rolls? Joseph thought to himself, "Hopefully no one mentions Obamacare or gun control. And if Uncle could not make vaguely racist comments this year, that would be great." Stephanie worried that her cousins and her aunts should be seated far apart because the cousins only listened to NPR and the aunts only watched FOX News. That could be a disaster. Bob felt a twinge of protection. Would anyone bring up his nephew's sobriety? Was it a good idea to make the Thanksgiving mystery punch this year? Someone glared a bit at the newcomers and then at the unexpected cousins. Who are these people? These kids just showed up half an hour before the meal was served. They didn't bring any food with them, they didn't do any of the work. They're going to eat a ton. Do they have any idea how much it costs to put a meal like this together?

Stomachs began to grumble. Everything looked beautiful and smelled even better. Marjorie began to reach out to hold the hands of the people next to her, and that spread from the kitchen into the dining room and living room. Family who had traveled great distances to surprise, happy 20-somethings who would have stayed in their dorm rooms had it not been for a generous invitation at the last minute, brothers and sister, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers and children, husbands and wives, dear friends. As they held hands and looked around, they started to remember the ones who weren't there anymore. Even with a record number of guests, there were still empty seats at those tables. Something began to move through them as they held onto each other. Something like light, certainly a warmth, each person tingled and felt their hearts beat faster almost as if a vibration was moving from Marjorie through each person in that home. No one dared speak as their

thoughts became still and an awesome gratitude filled their bodies. This must be what holy feels like, they all thought at once. Then Marjorie began to pray.

O God, we are grateful. You have brought us here to spend this day together. There is nowhere else we have to be right now but in this moment, with these people, in this place. From the fragrance of coffee and biscuits to the delight of turkey and rolls and side dishes to share, we are reminded of your abundance. There is always enough for each of us and all of us through you.

We are thankful for the new people who have joined us this year, for the loved ones gathered in this room, for the children who are healthy and happy and growing. We are thankful for the ways you provide for us and protect us, for the ways you gather us together and comfort us. There are many who are no longer with us around these tables today. We carry them in our hearts and ask that you carry us in our sadness as we miss them. Help us to live out the best parts of who they were when they were with us—their kindness, their hospitality, their grace, their love.

O God, we have witnessed a miracle today. Seeds that were planted turned into corn and beans and potatoes and grain. So many hands brought it to our table—farmers and grocers and cousins and friends. What started as something tiny is now a feast on many tables and in many rooms. There is enough for us all and plenty to share. With every bite, remind us of your presence and your provision. Remind us every day to be the people we are on this day—generous, light, unburdened, grateful. Remain with us in this place as we gather, as we eat, as we enjoy each other. It is in the name of your son, Jesus the Christ, that we are seeking to live and that we now pray. Amen.