

July 29, Ordinary 17B (John 6:1-21)

At that deserted spot on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus could've used a grocery store.

by [Malinda Elizabeth Berry](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue

This week's Gospel reading goes hand in glove with last week's. The disciples have been traveling, working long days to minister to all kinds of people. While trying to find a little peace and quiet, Jesus and his friends keep being followed by the curious and the critics. In all his compassion, Jesus wants to figure out how to feed the thousands of people. And there is the addition of Jesus walking on the water in the middle of a storm, offering interesting punctuation to the story of the loaves and fishes.

I think it's quite remarkable how numerous these feeding stories are. All four Gospels include the feeding of the 5,000; Matthew and Mark add a very similar story in which Jesus feeds 4,000. In all six stories, there are leftovers galore. While there are interesting exegetical nuances to attend to, I want to consider the thematic aspect of the feeding stories in relationship to food systems.

John's version of the feeding of the multitude is my favorite. Thanks to its use of a narrative figure, John's account is a popular Sunday school story for children—and the phrase “loaves and fishes” has currency beyond religious communities familiar with the story.

A few months ago, in a moment of nostalgia, I absconded with a book titled *Loaves and Fishes* from my mother's overflowing shelf of cookbooks. Coauthored by Linda Hunt, Marianne Frase, and Doris Liebert and published in 1980 by Herald Press, *Loaves and Fishes: A “Love Your Neighbor” Cookbook* is a children's version of Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* and Doris Janzen Longacre's *More-with-Less Cookbook*. Our love-worn copy is a bit tattered, but I'm enjoying introducing my children to recipes I tried as a kid that helped me learn about “healthy eating in a world of limited resources.”

Standing in contrast to my *Loaves and Fishes* cookbook are *The Loaves and Fishes Cookbook* (1987) and *The Loaves and Fishes Party Cookbook* (1990), by Anna Pump, founder of the Loaves and Fishes, a food store in the Hamptons. There is something quite appropriate about a family-owned business, located on the ocean in a not very populous place made up of hamlets, being named Loaves and Fishes. Jesus and the disciples are at the Sea of Galilee; they are trying to avoid the crowds, so they have found a relatively deserted spot to retreat to. This means that when Jesus has the idea to feed everyone, there are no convenient places to shop. They really could have used a Loaves and Fishes, although I imagine Philip's words in Mark's version of the story would still hold true: "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (Mark 6:7b).

These two appropriations of biblical feeding, a children's cookbook and a gourmet takeout shop, underscore the fact that everybody needs to eat. They also get us thinking about food's sacred qualities, especially when we pay attention to where food comes from and what happens when we share it with others. Hunt, Frase, and Liebert begin their book with their retelling of John's loaves and fishes story, adding an invitation to their readers: "[While] that happened a long time ago . . . Jesus still cares that everyone in the world has enough to eat. As with the gift of the young boy's lunch, what we do with our food can make a difference!" After outlining the basic statistics about food inequities, they explain that it is quite understandable that we might feel discouraged and helpless like Philip and Andrew. But we can channel those emotions for resilience and do what the boy does: contribute our little bit to the whole and see what might happen.

Yet it is difficult to embrace a "small is beautiful" ethic in our time and place. The organization Just Food offers a comprehensive definition of food justice: "Communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals. People practicing food justice leads to a strong local food system, self-reliant communities, and a healthy environment." While I am inspired by the food justice movement, I also live in a land of potlucks and processed foods, of cheap food from Wal-Mart and boutique food from Whole Foods, all of it making right relationship with food tough. Buying ethical food threatens to become a new form of piety for people like me with limited imagination for how to change the industrial food system. Multinational corporate control of food—like its siblings, late capitalism and environmental crisis—is not a tide easily

turned. And I have little certainty about how God might be calming storms like these.

In one of many tender scenes in the 2004 film *Millions*, the main character, a seven-year-old boy named Damian who has been reading a book about saints, has a conversation with St. Peter. Peter tells Damian his story about how 5,000 people were fed. The miracle wasn't that the initial gift of barley loaves and fishes were magically, ontologically multiplied. It was the way people chose sharing over hoarding that was miraculous, Peter explains.

The word *companion* comes from a Latin compound that means "one who breaks bread with another." As Jesus blesses and breaks bread in order to share it, he makes us his companions—and reminds us that the kingdom of God is like yeast a baker added to some flour, knowing a little goes a long way.