

In in certain parts of Europe, in some neighborhoods, you might pass a small café and see a refrigerator sitting up against a store wall. Over the fridge is a sign, which reads, "Take freely, only what you need." Seriously. People can walk up to that fridge, open the door, take what they need and walk away.

These "solidarity fridges," or "social fridges," are a way of showing the poor and needy that there are, in fact, people who care about them, who stand with them. They have also helped bring a sense of humaneness and dignity, to the homeless and impoverished, by helping to reduce their need to beg for food. These sidewalk fridges are not at all like soup kitchens, where the homeless have to line up, hold out their plates, in order to have a workers or volunteers fill their bowls with soup or food. No, in this model, the disadvantaged or the destitute, can find some relief from their hunger, by taking what they need, and leaving the rest.

The food itself is put into the fridges by café and restaurant owners, and sometimes by concerned citizens. By putting food in curbside fridges, food that otherwise would've been thrown in the trash, and wasted, is redistributed, while, at the same time, helping to feed people in need. Luis Pondal, who owns a restaurant in Argentina, explains: "I was sick of seeing how food got thrown away and then shortly afterward, people were foraging for it. ... why not give it to them with some dignity?"

The movement, which began in Spain back in 2015 has jumped to other countries as well -- countries like Saudi Arabia, India, and even France. Of course, you can't just leave *anything* in these fridges. The rules are pretty strict: no meat or eggs, and packaged or canned goods cannot be past their use-by date. Moreover, anything prepared at home must include a label featuring when it was made. And -- no raw fish! Bread is okay. But no fish!

Unless you're Jesus that is! Then you accept fish and bread, even if the donation isn't very much. In ours Bible story today, from the Gospel of Matthew,

we observe a rather small donation of five little barley loaves and two little fish. And yet, this little faith-filled donation fed thousands! In fact, the immense feeding that takes place, as a result of this offering, can be seen as a foreshadowing of what Jesus is able to offer us. **He is able to feed our bodies and our souls** especially as we take a look at the events that have led him to invite such a ginormous crowd of people over for dinner.

Before our narrative begins, we should probably be aware that Jesus has just been teaching people in the countryside. A crowd had gathered and the afternoon slips by. It was one of those magical kinds of days when you lose track of all time. But what could Jesus say to enthrall these people who scarcely had an afternoon to spare? These were common folk, who had a hard life. They toiled in the fields of an arid land under a blistering sun, eking out an existence as they worked the soil. Children labored alongside their parents -- if not in the fields, then in the carpentry shop, or over the hot fires of a blacksmith's forge. Life was hard and peasants died young. And all the while, they worked in the shadow of their Roman oppressors.

Yet, even so, there they were, out in the countryside, listening to this man Jesus. They were huge fans. When Jesus cast off from shore to escape the crowds in order to grieve over the death of John the Baptist, they trooped around the lake on foot to find him -- no easy task considering the size of Galilee, and they succeeded. They found the man who, in the same Gospel would later say, "Come unto me, all you who labor and I will give you rest." But, truth is, we don't know what Jesus said to these people who had followed him to a "deserted place."

It's likely that he didn't say much at all. But, we *do* know that both the crowds and Jesus were linked by one common desire: They both needed consolation and encouragement. Jesus, for one, had just lost his cousin John. At the beginning of today's narrative he had just received the sad news from the Baptist's own disciples, who had recently taken his body and buried it. When Jesus heard

about the tragedy, he ran for a boat, and paddled off for a "deserted place," perhaps hoping to be alone.

Unfortunately the people in the crowd saw in Jesus someone who could make their lives better, and they don't give him much of an opportunity to grieve. They want to hear more from him, they want to spend more time with him, and so, instead of being irritated when the crowds arrived..... Jesus saw them, he had compassion on them, and he spent the rest of the day healing the sick. It's even possible that he taught them as well, feeding their souls. The gospel of Luke suggests that this is precisely what happened. He talked about the nature of God's Kingdom.

Still, there's nothing in our text from Matthew to suggest that Jesus sat on a nice rounded boulder, or on a grassy tuft of a hill, preaching to an expectant crowd, as he does in his Sermon on the Mount. Matthew says nothing at all about any Bible teaching. All we read is that "he had compassion for them and cured their sick." Grieving over the loss of his childhood friend and buddy, his colleague in ministry, and close family member as well, Jesus still had compassion and spent an entire afternoon working with the "great crowd," curing their sick.

Perhaps working with these people, who needed deliverance and encouragement, fed Jesus' soul and strengthened him for the work that was ahead of him. Although this story -- a story found in all four gospels -- is usually called "The Feeding of the 5,000," the feeding was just part of the story, and it happened only at the end of the day -- and the number was probably closer to 10,000 than 5,000. Women and children were probably not included in the attendance count that was taken that day.

The primary focus of Jesus' afternoon work, as I just mentioned, was not *feeding* the body, but curing the body. And when Jesus did this, he also touched something deeper, something in the soul of that crowd that realigned them with

God. He cured their sick – and + didn't ask them to make a pledge, + didn't ask them to go to synagogue next Sabbath,+ didn't ask them to register as a Pharisee or Sadducee,+ didn't ask them if they'd been divorced,+ didn't ask them if they were for or against gun control,+ didn't ask if they were pro-life and+ *he* didn't discriminate because of gender (women and children were healed and fed, too).

When the sun began to sink and his disciples noticed the end of the day drawing near, they realize that the people would probably be getting hungry! In response to this new impending need they suggest to Jesus that he send the crowds away so they might go into town before nightfall and get a burrito at Chipotle, or a Big Mac from McDonalds, or something. He responds by telling his students to let the crowd stay! That was his approach: You don't send people away; you ask them to stay. And then you find out what they need, and then you meet that need. So Jesus says to his disciples, "You feed them." After all, hadn't he told some of them that he would teach them **how to fish for people**?

The disciples respond to Jesus, and his command, by telling him that they have nothing -- except five loaves and two fish." And he replies, "Bring them here to me!" Sort of a subtle way of throwing shade at his disciples who didn't seem to get it. So, Jesus says (sigh): "Bring them here to me." This is all Jesus can ask. "Bring me what you got. And I will do the rest." Oddly the little boy in St. John's version of the story isn't mentioned, perhaps giving us the opportunity to think about what we would we bring to Jesus, if he were to ask us to offer a contribution?

Something else was happening that day, as well. According to John's Gospel Jesus will say on the very next day to these same people, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." It is a scene which only comes into focus after we see Jesus lifted up on the cross, after we watch as he distributes the bread to his disciples in the upper room and says, "Take, eat, this is my body given

for you." It was a lesson that perhaps he hoped the crowds would understand when he distributed the five loaves and two fish. He hoped that they would catch a glimpse of the divine, and that they might "believe in the one who sent him."

But Jesus was no fool. He knew what was going on. When he saw these same people the next day, he knew why they had once again followed him. He said, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

Jesus' Eucharistic distribution of the loaves and fish that day was supposed to remind the people in the crowd of Moses who had fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness. They were supposed to see an individual greater-than-Moses among them, and they were supposed to believe in "him who [God] had sent." And herein lies the tragedy of some of our own life experiences we have had with Jesus: We don't always see Jesus! We don't always recognize who he is, or what he's done for us.

In this encounter alone, we learn a ton about Jesus: he experienced sorrow (the death of his cousin John); he needed down-time and understood the importance of rest; he had a strategy in his dealings with crowds; he had clear priorities; he was not driven by the expectations of others; he always made time for individuals; he delegated (by giving the bread and fish to others to distribute); and he had a trusted inner circle of colleagues to help him with the work.

These are some of the things we see in today's Gospel Eucharistic moment, as Jesus teaches his disciples by way of example, and -- puts aside his personal needs -- has compassion and gives himself to the people in the crowd who had gathered that day. Similarly, the church has an opportunity to be the bread of life to the people around us, now more than ever. Why? Because the need is greater than ever! Perhaps we too can act as solidarity fridges, or social fridges, in our

neighborhoods. The church can and should be a place where people are fed, both body and soul. And the more we take the bread, bless it, give thanks for it, and distribute it, the more we learn that there is plenty of Jesus to go around, there is plenty of Jesus for everyone! Thanks be to God. Amen.