

ALL THE PEOPLE

I love to eat. Yeah, food and me, we go way back. The drawback is that the satisfaction I get from eating is temporary. I can feast like a king when I have lunch at Wendy's—typically a Homestyle Chicken Sandwich, no mayonnaise please, a baked potato, Diet Coke, and oh, don't forget the Frosty for dessert—and only a few hours after scarfing it down I'm hungry again!

God created us human beings with this constant need for food. One meal, by itself, can't sustain us and keep us alive for an entire lifetime. We have to eat on a regular basis to be able to survive. In that sense, the tangible benefits of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two small fish—as incredible as that event was—were temporary and short-lived.

Every last one of those five thousand people who picnicked with Jesus that day eventually got hungry again, and they needed to eat. I'm sure at least some of those five thousand people, when they got home that evening, asked themselves, "I wonder what's for dinner." I'm not trying to belittle this extraordinary event. Jesus' feeding of the five thousand was clearly significant and made a huge impression on the disciples. We know that because it's the only one of Jesus' miracles that was recorded in all four of the Gospels. However, its importance stems, not from the feeding itself, but from what the feeding points to.

If you read between the lines of this story, it reverberates with the expectation that, in the Kingdom of God, all of God's people will be invited to sit at God's great banquet table, and they will all be fed. Every one of them will be nourished by God's own hand. In other words, the feeding of the five thousand gives us a glimpse into the very nature of the God we worship. God is the One who feeds God's people.

What occurred to me when I read this story again is that not a single person in that crowd of five thousand was excluded from the meal. Which posed a bit of a dilemma. The crowd was so large, so massive, that the disciple Philip, who must have been a pretty good mathematician in his previous life, did some quick calculating and told Jesus it would be impossible to purchase that much food for that many people.

"It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for

each one to have a bite!”

And Jesus’ response was, “Have the people sit down.”

What? Lord, we’re about talking five thousand or more people. You can’t be serious!

“Have the people sit down.” Every one of those five thousand people was hungry. And Jesus intended for every one of them to be fed.

An argument could be made, if you wanted to make it, that Jesus didn’t have to go to all that trouble. It would have been perfectly understandable if he had done a little weeding out to exclude some people. Jesus could have made the tough but necessary decisions as to who deserved to be fed and who did not. For example, there were probably people among the multitude who were there for what could be called selfish reasons; such as people who were sick and whose only intention was to be healed so they could get on with their life. Should they be fed?

Others there were probably just curious. They had heard that there was a new rabbi in town, and he was doing some awesome things. Those people weren’t interested in making a radical, life-changing decision to give up everything and commit to following Jesus as he demanded. They were just noseys, or looking for a little entertainment. Most likely they would be gone by tomorrow and never heard from again. Do they need to be fed, too?

Some individuals in the crowd surely had a sordid, shameful past. It’s a logical assumption that in a group of five thousand people, at least a few of them were bad apples who lived rotten, scandalous lives, and had disobeyed God’s commandments. Not just one commandment. I’m talking multiple violations. Do we need to feed them, too?

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Not just some, but all of them.

Flannery O’Conner wrote a story about Mr. and Mrs. Claude Turpin. One day they went to see a doctor because Claude had an ulcer on his leg where he was kicked by a cow. While they were waiting to be seen by the doctor, Mrs. Turpin encountered a colorful cast of characters. There was a rude young boy who wouldn’t move so that she could have a seat; an overweight teenage girl whose face was blue with acne; an older man who seemed to be asleep; a pleasant, nicely dressed lady with whom she struck up a conversation; a thin, leathery-skinned old lady in a cotton print dress; and a sad-faced woman who was certainly the rude young boy’s mother. This woman was wearing an unwashed, dirty looking yellow sweatshirt and wine-colored slacks, and the edges of her mouth were stained with snuff tobacco. Her greasy yellow hair was tied behind with a piece of red paper ribbon.

“White trash,” Mrs. Turpin thought to herself.

Sometimes at night, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself. What if Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There are only two places available for you. You can be a black woman or white trash"?

"Please, Jesus," she would have responded. "Just let me wait until there is another place available." But being forced to choose, she finally decided that she would rather be a neat, clean, respectable Negro woman than white trash. But now an unpleasant encounter with the ugly young girl in the doctor's office brought a new dimension to the question. What if Jesus had said, "All right, you can be white trash, or black, or ugly." Mrs. Turpin, you see, did her best to neatly categorize people and put them in their proper slots. It helped her to feel so much better about herself.

While all those thoughts were running through her mind, she carried on a conversation with the well-dressed woman sitting beside her. The woman quickly discovered that Mrs. Turpin was politely condescending toward those she had decided weren't as blessed as she had been.

"If there's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "it's grateful.

When I think who all I could have been besides myself, and what all I got—a little of everything—and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, "Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!"

At that the ugly young girl, who had been listening in on the conversation and growing increasingly angry at Mrs. Turpin's snotty attitude, threw a book and hit Mrs. Turpin right above the eye. Then the girl's hands were at Mrs. Turpin's throat, until she was pulled away and given a sedative.

"She's a lunatic!" someone in the waiting room said. But before the ambulance arrived to take the poor demented, ugly young girl away, she looked into Mrs. Turpin's eyes. There was no doubt in Mrs. Turpin's mind that the girl somehow knew her, in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and human condition.

"Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog," the girl said to Mrs. Claude Turpin.

For the rest of the day, those words ate at Mrs. Turpin's soul. At the end of the day, she was back on their farm. She was at the pigpen, angrily hosing down some recently weened piglets. The story ends this way.

"Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to the piglets, as if she were absorbing some abysmal, life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted up her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading—like an extension of the highway—into the descending dusk.

“A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge, extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast hoard of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash—clean for the first time in their lives—and bands of black Negroes in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.

“And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who—like herself and Claude—had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity—accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone sang on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

“Mrs. Turpin lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was—immobile. At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up—but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

It may well be that, like Mrs. Claude Turpin, we’re all going to be totally shocked about the kind of people who make it into God’s realm, who will be leading the procession to the Lord’s banquet table, and who will be bringing up the rear.

And Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.”

And I said, “All the people? Surely we must put them in categories so the good people won’t be mixed in with the bad.”

Jesus looked me in the eye and repeated, “Have the people sit down.”

Lord, surely you won’t be able to feed all of these people. And you don’t need to feed them all. After all, some are white trash. Some have a different skin color than I have. Some are foreigners. Some don’t work as hard as I do. Some don’t have the right kind of pedigree. Some simply aren’t worthy to be fed, Lord. Let me shoo some of them away.”

And Jesus, shaking his head at me and sighing said, “No, I said I want to feed all the people. But if you’re concerned, about that, don’t worry. I’m going to make sure there’s more than enough for everyone to be fed. Including you.”

Thanks be to our gracious, loving, inclusive and merciful God. Amen.