

THE BREAD LINE

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Grace Church in New York
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And all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. (Mark 6:42-43)

Last month the title of a feature article in *The New York Times* (6/27/21) caught my eye. “After Death, The Big Chill,” is how it read. The subject of the piece was cryonics. Cryonics is a means by which some people hope to cheat death and steal more years of life. How does it work? Well, at the moment of death – a moment, unfortunately, that awaits us all – the goal is to pump your body full of medical-grade antifreeze, then store it in a tank of super-cooled liquid nitrogen for the indefinite future. The hope is that centuries from now medical science will have advanced enough so that you can be thawed out, cured of whatever killed you, awakened, and sent on your way with a new lease on life. The firms that practice cryonics offer no guarantees. It’s merely a shot at adding not just life to your years, but years to your life.

You may be wondering: what does it cost to have a body cryonically preserved? The answer is \$200,000 for the whole body, but if you want what is known as a neuro-preservation – that is, just the head – then the price drops to \$80,000. But what sort of life could you have if you were just a head? How would you brush your teeth? Suppose a fly lands on your nose. Max More, former president of a cryonics firm explains it this way: “I don’t understand why people want to take their broken-down old body with them. In the future it’ll probably be easier to start from scratch and just regenerate the body anyway. The important stuff is up here,” he said, pointing to his head. “All the rest is replaceable.”

Finally, you may have questions about the spiritual implications of cryonics. Max More reports that potential clients who are Christians often hesitate because they don’t want to be dragged back from heaven on the off-chance that a frozen corpse could actually be revived. To counter such fears More suggests to them that they may be traveling from the other direction. “Are you sure you’re not going downstairs?” he asks. “And if so, don’t you want an escape clause? Cryonics might give you a chance to come back and do some good works so you will have a better chance of getting into heaven.” Max More may be a terrible theologian, but he’s not half bad at sales. So far his firm has 182 bodies in the freezer, and nearly 1,400 more who have signed on the dotted line in hopes of having more life, and having it abundantly.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark (6:30-44) we’ve heard a familiar story: the feeding of the 5,000, sometimes called the feeding of the multitudes. For some weeks prior to where we pick up the story today, Jesus and the disciples had been traveling the countryside dealing with all sorts and conditions of people. Restless throngs pressed in on them wherever they went. Mark says that they had no leisure even to eat. Therefore, they tried to withdraw from the masses by taking a boat to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee. When the multitudes noticed Jesus’ trying to escape they ran around on shore, and beat him to the other side of the lake. Imagine how Jesus must have felt when he pulled ashore and found the same crush of people with all their needs waiting to greet him.

Jesus had every right to respond with frustration, even irritation, but he did not. Instead of exasperation, he looked at them with compassion. Instead of rowing away he braced himself for another day’s work. When the hour had grown late the crowd had swelled to at least five-thousand people. It was time to eat, but they were far from food. The disciples wanted to send people home. But Jesus had another idea: *You give them something to eat.* The disciples protested. They looked

at the vast assembly and guessed it would take two-hundred denarii, or 24,000 of today's dollars, to buy enough bread for all of them. What did they have? Well, they took inventory and declared, "*We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.*"

What did Jesus do? "Bring them here to me," is what he said to the disciples. When the disciples gave the loaves and fish to Jesus, he took the offering and blessed it. Then he organized a breadline for five-thousand people. *And all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.* How the multiplication of resources happened is not the point. Whether it was a miracle of sharing, or whether it was a miracle of bringing something out of nothing, the point of the miracle is the abundance of life in God's kingdom. God, who is the giver of every good gift, has life and blessings to give that surpass our wildest imaginings. The question is, do you trust that God wants to give? Is your operating mindset one of abundance or scarcity?

Many people fall into the mindset of scarcity. Many people unconsciously live by a philosophy that the Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, described as "Promethean Theology."¹ You may recall that Prometheus is the figure from Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods. The gods jealously guarded fire because they knew it was the key to civilization. Without fire no art or commerce or progress would be possible for humanity, and mortals would remain in caves, which is exactly where the gods wanted them to be. As long as mortals were cave dwellers they would pose no threat to the citizens of Mt. Olympus. So the Greek gods were beyond indifferent to the plight of humanity. They did not wish humankind well, and actively thwarted the perfection of earth's inhabitants. Thus it became necessary for Prometheus to raid heaven and steal divine fire.

Likewise, Merton argues that anytime we suspect God is against us, not for us, we become followers of Prometheus, not disciples of Jesus. Sometimes we conclude that God must be stingy. We quarrel with the quantity and the quality of life, and it becomes necessary to plunder the blessings we assume that God does not want us to have. Cryonics, in its attempt to cheat death and steal more life, is an extreme form of Promethean Theology. Imagine, you're going to trick God by escaping hell, doing a few good deeds, and storming heaven! Mind you, now, I'm not railing against the medical ethics of cryonics, or denouncing it as a great scourge of our time. Really, if some people want to spend their money on the big chill after death, who am I to judge? It does, however, raise questions about our relationship to God. If God is the giver of life, then do you trust that God has more life to give after our mortal bodies lie in death? Or is this life all that we get? Are these earthly years, regardless of how we might extend them, the sum of our existence? Or could it be that God has so much life to give that we don't need to hoard it, guard it, or even worry about it? If so, we can spend our time giving it away, trusting that we can never out-give God. *You give them something to eat*, said Jesus.

Here's a fun fact that you can pull out of your back pocket whenever it's timely to impress your friends with Biblical knowledge. The feeding of the multitudes, one version of which we heard today, occurs six times in the four Gospels. The details vary. Sometimes it is five-thousand fed, and other times the number is four-thousand. Sometimes the initial offering of loaves is five, other times it is seven. Is it two separate miracles, or varying versions of the same event? Such questions miss the point. The point, again, is the abundance of God's generosity. It's as if the four Gospel writers wanted to be absolutely clear that we got the message, and that this story became a centerpiece of our faith.

Do you see the connection between the Eucharist and the feeding of the multitudes? Do you see the connection between the bread that is here and the bread that was there? The bread is the offering of ourselves. In obedience to Jesus, who said, "Bring it here to me," we place on the altar the representatives of everything we are, and we ask him to take what little we have and

¹ Thomas Merton, The New Man. The Noonday Press, 1961, p. 23.

multiply it. Take my nothing and make it into something. Take my sin and turn it into salvation. Take my death and transform it into life. Then, with faith and trust in the abundance of God, we leave the mindset of scarcity behind and go forth into the world with freedom to live a new way. *You give them something to eat*, said Jesus.

Over the years I have found that an important question to ask about the miracles of Jesus is not so much, what happened long ago and far away? Rather, where have we seen the same power of God at work closer to home in more contemporary times? Where do we see people living in complete confidence of God's abundance? One example that comes to mind is something that would happen nightly right in front of Grace Church. In fact, it's an important story to tell in this our 175th anniversary in this building and neighborhood.

The time was the late 19th century, which seems long ago to us now, but compared to when Jesus walked the earth it was only yesterday. In those days, directly south of Grace Church, where the lawn of Huntington Close and the playground are today, stood a building that ran the length of 10th Street between Broadway and 4th Avenue. The first floor and basement housed Fleischmann's Vienna Model Bakery, including a popular café out front. The owner and operator was a remarkable man name Louis Fleischmann, an Austrian who had immigrated to the United States and started the bakery. It was a great success, and Fleischmann soon became a wealthy man.

One night Fleischmann noticed a group of men at the corner of 10th and Broadway, huddled around a grate that led to the basement where the bread was baking. They were jobless and hungry, and one of them asked Fleischmann himself, who happened to be standing nearby, if he could have a loaf of bread for his family. Fleischmann obliged him, and soon a line formed. Fleischmann determined that going forward, from midnight to 1 am every morning, the Vienna Bakery would give a loaf of bread to anyone who stood in line. Many nights the line would begin to form as early as 10 o'clock, and upwards of 500 men stood for hours waiting for a loaf of bread. The line stretched from the middle of 10th Street, turned north on Broadway, and extended well beyond the front of Grace Church's doors. It became known near and far simply as "the bread line."

As far as we know, Grace Church didn't participate directly in the work of the bread line. At the time we were operating Grace Chapel, the Day Nursery, and multiple other ministries to those on the margins. But relations between the church and bakery were always cordial. Others criticized Fleischmann for encouraging men to beg rather than work. He replied, *"If a man will stand on a curb two or three hours in all kinds of weather to get half a loaf of bread or a few rolls, he's hungry. That's quite enough for me. If I started to find out if each man was worthy, he would probably starve during the investigation."*² Fleischmann would go on to say that he desired to live by the Biblical injunction not to let his right hand know what his left hand was doing. He would persist with the bread line for nearly 30 years, never keeping track of what it cost him. Here was a man who gave his life away, trusting in God's abundance.

Fleischmann died in 1904, and a few years later the building next door went up for sale. The bakery and bread line moved a few blocks away and carried on for many more years. Grace Church bought the old bakery building, imploded it, and covered the rubble with topsoil to make Huntington Close. Some years ago when Grace Church School was building an underground gymnasium, guess what we found? Louis Fleischmann's ovens, complete with bricks charred by the fires that had had fed the multitudes.

I keep a few of those bricks in my office to remind me to trust in God's abundance, made known to us in the breaking and giving of bread. *And all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.*

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² "Death of Its Founder Will Not Make Any Break In Its Usefulness," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1904.