

Bread and miracles: *John 6:1-21*

Do you believe God will provide what you need to do the ministry God wants done?

by [H. Stephen Shoemaker](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. (Somebody once said that next to Homer's *Odyssey* the Bible is the "eatingest" book in the world.) But John's Gospel is the only one that sets the miracle at Passover. The connection is charged: It is God who feeds and saves, and a meal is a sign of God's justice and mercy. John Dominic Crossan called the early Christian Eucharist the embodiment of justice. Yes, that and mercy too.

I've experienced this gospel truth at my former congregation in Fort Worth, Texas, which on Thursdays throws open the fellowship hall to the homeless of the city, 200 or so. We sit down with them and eat a family-style meal together. We call it our Agape Meal. There are tablecloths, cut flowers and platters of delicious food with identifiable meats, but the most crucial and most wonderful thing is that over the years the church and the homeless people of Fort Worth have become friends.

The lectionary joins John's miracle with Elisha's miracle feeding. The parallels are suggestive. A "boy" is needed as a major actor. Barley loaves are the bread served. There is the same beginning question: "How can we serve so many with so little?" and the same conclusion: All ate to their fill and still there was food left over.

In John's Gospel Jesus begins with the question, "Where are we to buy bread?" Philip answers: Half-a-year's salary wouldn't be enough. A boy is found carrying five barley loaves and two fish. With that gift Jesus gives thanks and begins to distribute the food. Miraculously, all have plenty to eat.

The miracle asks the church the question, "Do you believe God will provide what you need to do the ministry God wants done?" Note the essential qualifiers—what we *need*, not want, and the ministry *God* wants, not necessarily the ministry we've planned. Another way to ask the question: Do we operate according to a mind-set of

abundance or of scarcity? The former engenders generosity and hope; the latter brings anxiety and competition.

John's miracle tells us that God wants hungry people fed. There is no need that is of little concern to God. But the miracle (because it is also a "sign") begins to teach us that God wants more than stomachs filled.

Which brings me back to our Agape Meal. When we began, 15 or 20 homeless people showed up. They were justifiably skeptical and, because there were more of us than them, a little nervous. These days, however, the hall fills with people, from infants to older adults, Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American and Native American—the streets of our cities are very democratic. And we eat together, church and community. One guest said, "We know the food is good because you sit and eat it with us." After the meal we worship around the tables. Fair warning is given and over half leave before the first song. One guest said, "Thanks for giving us our freedom of religion!"

After worship we offer communion in the chapel next door. About 15 come. Some weep as they come down the aisle. They thought they'd never take communion again. When you lose your home you often lose your access to the sacraments. The exclusion of economics keeps thousands of people from the Lord's Table every week. What must Christ be thinking?

When we began the Agape Meal we did not know how long the ministry would last or how we would fund it. Today, five years of Thursdays later, 30,000 meals have been eaten around those tables and we have never been short of money.

But the greater miracle is the lives of the people who have joined the gathering and the friendships begun: The schizophrenic woman trying to stay safe and on her meds says that this night gets her to the next Thursday night because here she feels beloved and treasured. Wayne, an older man, lived behind the Pizza Hut and kept warm in an electric blanket the manager let him hook up on cold nights. For the last three years of his life, before he was killed in a car crash, he said this weekly meal kept him alive. A young girl who lives in a cheap motel with her mother comes every year for her birthday meal. A talented African-American man who has led our singing on Thursdays battled through several seasons of recovery and relapse with his chemical addictions, and is now married and a new father. He is feeling called to the preaching ministry.

Then there is Mary, who would not speak a word or look at a person when she first came, but last spring spoke before our entire congregation of 700, and “Tree,” a huge lumberjack of a man with a bushy black beard and bandanna and a voice that sounds like a giant tree splitting down the middle, who gives thanks for “the head dude,” the unseen provider for the meal. And then there was a young teen who was so touched by the tenderness and love that she went to a phone, called her mother, and said, “Mom, I’m coming home.”

The meal is Exodus and Passover, the shadow of death and the miracle of life, feeding in the wilderness and resurrection every week.

One Thursday a middle-aged Hispanic man came for communion. As I served him he made the sign of the cross and tears streamed down his face. Afterwards I said glibly, “Come back next week. The food is always good.” He stopped me. “The food’s not why I come,” he said as he nodded toward the fellowship hall. “This is why I come,” he said, pointing to the bread and wine.

There are different kinds of hunger and different kinds of bread. That is why, when the crowds come after him—their stomachs filled, awed by the miracle—and want to make him king, Jesus flees and goes off to be by himself.