

“Loaves and Fishes”

Once upon a time a man had a dream that he had a chance to visit both heaven and hell. An angel appeared to him and led him down a long, dark staircase. At the bottom, they opened a door, and inside the man saw a room full of people, and noticed that all of them were sitting around a great, steaming pot of soup. The soup smelled delicious. But the people were all thin and hungry-looking. "What's the matter with these people," the man asked the angel. "They seem to be starving. Why can't they eat?" And the angel told him that each of the people had been given a spoon or a fork that was longer than his or her own arm. The man then saw a woman dish up a spoonful of the mouth-watering soup—but the spoon was so long she couldn't put it in her mouth. Next he saw a man spear a piece of potato with his fork—but the fork was so long he couldn't take even one bite. "So this is hell," the man said sadly. "I do feel sorry for these hungry souls." "Come now," said the angel, "and let me show you heaven."

Together the two mounted a long staircase, high into the sky, until finally there appeared a door. They opened the door and found a room full of people, all seated around a great boiling pot of soup. The soup was fragrant with onions and tomatoes and vegetables. And each person in the circle had a very long spoon, and an extremely long fork, and all were joking and talking happily. "I don't understand," said the man to the angel. "This room looks just like the room in hell. But no one is hungry. Nobody is sad. What the secret that makes these people so full of joy?" "There is no secret," the angel replied. "But here in heaven, the people have learned how to feed each other."

The world could be a heavenly place if we only learned to share. This Thanksgiving many in our country will have no home where they can celebrate the holiday. Many people around the world won't have enough food for themselves or their families. Yet we know that our planet produces enough protein to feed all of its citizens. We know that even now there is money enough to waste on prisons and war machines. All people can be fed; no one needs to be hungry; all can live in decency. There is no secret to this, for there truly is enough to share.

It reminds me of the parable of the loaves and fishes. The tale is told that Jesus was preaching to crowds of listeners one day, telling them about the goodness of God. When evening came, his followers the disciples came to him and said, "Send these people away, so they can go into the villages and farms round about to find food and lodging." But Jesus said, "We can feed the people ourselves." The disciples protested, "All we have is five loaves of bread and two fishes. There are at least five thousand people here." But Jesus told the crowd to sit down. He took the loaves and fishes, broke them, and said a blessing over them, putting the pieces into baskets to distribute to the people. And the story says "they all ate to their hearts' content; and when the scraps they left were picked up, they filled twelve great baskets."

There have been many people who followed Jesus' example, feeding the hungry with the faith that there is enough to go around. One of these was a woman named Dorothy Day, who wrote a book called *Loaves and Fishes* describing her life.

Dorothy first began to think about sharing as a young girl, living in San Francisco with her family. One morning she woke up and the bed she was in was rolling back and forth over the wooden floor. The earth was moving! "The earthquake started with a deep rumbling," she remembered later, "and the convulsions of the earth started afterward, so that the earth became a sea which rocked our house in a most tumultuous manner. There was a large windmill and water tank in back of the house and I can remember the

splashing of water from the tank on the top of our roof. My father took my brothers from their beds and rushed to the front door, where my mother stood with my sister." Everyone in Dorothy's family escaped safely, but others were not so lucky. Many houses caught on fire. "The flames and cloud bank of smoke could be seen across the bay," she said, "and all the next day the refugees poured over by ferry and by boat." It was a frightened experience for Dorothy, but what she remembered most was the way everybody pitched in during the days that followed. All the neighbors joined together in caring for the homeless. They made sandwiches and soup to feed the hungry. Every stitch of extra clothing—shoes, sweaters and blankets—was given to those in need. When she was a teenager, wondering what to do with her life, Dorothy remembered that experience. "I wanted everyone to be kind," she said. "I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake."

Years later, Dorothy Day realized her dream when she opened what she called a House of Hospitality in the slums of New York City. It was at once a shelter for the homeless, a clothing bank and soup kitchen, and soon there were more houses in other cities. Because she fed striking workers, some people called Dorothy Day a communist. Because she was a pacifist, many questioned her loyalty to the country. But she considered herself to be simply a Christian, loyal to the teaching to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Dorothy and her companions received no salaries nor any government funds for their work. They were as poor as the people they served. But they were rich with friends. And inside they were rich with ideas for creating a more just and caring world, where all people could live in dignity, free from the fear of poverty and war.

Looking back over her life, Dorothy Day reflected on the miracle of the loaves and fishes. "How many times, all through my life, have I surveyed these tables full of people and wondered if the bread would go around; how many times have I noticed how one heaps his plate and the last one served has little ... Where does it all go? How will it all be paid for? But the miracle is that it does get paid for, sooner or later. The miracle is ... that seldom do more people come in than we can feed." The miracle, too (I might add), is that people like Dorothy Day continue to believe in abundance in the midst of want and dignity in the midst of degradation.

When Dorothy died in 1980, her memorial was held in the biggest church in New York City, and there were thousands of people there to say good-bye. Some were notables and some were nobodies, but all were equally important in Dorothy's eyes.

Dorothy Day did not just die and go to heaven; she carried heaven around inside her, her whole life long. For heaven is knowing how to share. Heaven is knowing both that we need other people and that they are in need of us.

Guest at Your Table

When people learn to share, there's enough to go around. Francis Moore Lappe, who is now a member of our Unitarian church in Belmont, Massachusetts, learned that lesson when she began to research her first book, *Diet for a Small Planet*. "I am a classic child of the 1960's," she wrote in her introduction to that volume. "I graduated from a small Quaker college in 1966, a year of extreme anguish for many, and certainly for me: the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movements, the War on Poverty." After college, she

began working as a community organizer in Philadelphia, but felt she wasn't really getting to the root of the problem: why people were malnourished in a world of such abundance. What she eventually concluded was that it wasn't lack of food or resources that forced so many into desperation. Even very poor countries had enough land and rainfall to feed their people. The earth could produce a surplus of grain, but still children went hungry, because there was a planetary shortage of justice. Corn that should be making tortillas was being fed to cattle for fast food restaurants. Land that should be sown in rice and beans was being tilled with export crops for U.S. markets. Instead of more foreign aid to the third world, she discovered, American needed to stop sending aid to the wrong places—to corrupt regimes that served the interests of U.S. agribusiness rather than serving their own citizens. Lappe's book *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*, published in 1980, became a study guide for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and a model for their development work, which focuses not on direct delivery of food commodities, but on partnering with human rights organizations around the world to campaign for women's empowerment and workplace democracy ... promoting fair trade instead of just free trade, winning workers a livable wage, supporting farmer's coops, making credit available for micro-business ... in places from Sri Lanka to the Sudan to Mississippi.

When you welcome a Guest at Your Table, you'll meet people like Jacinta, who is a tailor and mother of two living in Machakos, Kenya. With the help of her young apprentice, she weaves and sells school uniforms in a busy open-air market. A woman leader, Jacinta is also chairperson of the Machakos Group for Disabled Street Vendors. With your help, through the UUSC, Jacinta and thousands of other street vendors are organizing to advance their right to safe working conditions and sustainable incomes.

Not all of us can open our own homes like a House of Hospitality, in the manner of Dorothy Day. But we can invite a guest to the table whenever we sit down to our meals, sharing not only the blessings of good food, but of personal autonomy and economic self-determination with all the Jacintas of the world.