

Leftovers and Bestovers

Matthew 14:13-21

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One night a wonderful word came to me. Whether it was a word from the Lord I cannot say. Still, a word came to me, and I was immediately grateful. When we were raising our four kids, it was not unusual to serve a meal and have every single bit of the meal consumed. Now, even though there are two of us living in our home, and there have only been two of us for more than five years, we often cook exactly like we did when all four kids were at home. Meaning, we make enough food for a whole household. Fortunately, we do not feel obligated to eating it all at one sitting. This leads to the phenomenon known as leftovers.

The night this word came to me was a night we were eating leftovers. Although I remember the word that came to me very distinctly, for the life of me I cannot remember what it was we were eating that night for leftovers. But to understand leftovers in our family, part of the allure is that there is a lot of food leftover because the things we love, we make in large quantities. I cannot make a small batch of spaghetti or a small pan of lasagna. These are favorites and I look forward to having them two or three times. Although I can't say for sure, I think the night the word came to me we might have been eating Shepherd's Pie.

I like to think I make a good Shepherd's Pie, but I can say without a doubt the Shepherd's Pie I make in Westerly, Rhode Island is the best I've ever made. Every once in a while on a special occasion Julie will go to see Tony Spino and order a prime rib. Julie makes an incredible prime rib, and no matter if Julie tells Tony we only need a small prime rib for four people, he always sends her home with a huge cut of meat. Even after we eat to our heart's content, there is always a ton of this delicious meat left over. So I use that meat in the Shepherd's Pie. That means with Shepherd's Pie, the leftovers are doubly blessed. There is left over prime rib in the Shepherd's Pie, and then there is left over Shepherd's Pie, and it is like one blessing after another. I can't say for sure, but I think this wonderful word came to me on a night when we were enjoying

Shepherd's Pie for the second or third time as leftovers. As we got ready to fall asleep Julie said, "Those were good leftovers." It was at that point the word came to me. I said, "Those aren't just leftovers. Those are bestovers."

I wonder if you can relate to that word *bestovers*? Part of what makes it a bestover is that it is more than a meal. There was the prime rib for a special occasion. There was this image of Tony and the smile on his face, the twinkle in his eye, and his great skill as a butcher. There is a memory of delivering a Shepherd's Pie to Mark Storm when Joy was going through her illness and as Mark thanked me for the food he said, "Imagine, a shepherd who makes Shepherd's Pie." And it was our Deacon's making Shepherd's Pie for the Diamond Lunch, and it was for the pan it was cooked in that is a favorite of Julie's, and it was for a friend who took me to a restaurant 25 years ago that served Shepherd's Pie, and as we ate that pie he listened to me and laughed with me and encouraged me and loved me, and it was...all of these extra special ingredients that went into the Shepherd Pie that made it so special. When I use the word bestover it means that it wasn't a meal that blessed us just once, it blessed us twice, and then again, and sometimes a fourth time. As much as I like the word bestover, maybe another way of looking at it is as blessedovers. Blessed over and over and over again.

Jesus was in a solitary place. The setting isn't immediately clear, but we find out a few verses into the story that his disciples are with him. And then the crowds found out where he was and they came in droves. In the Gospel of Matthew, this particular story comes right after John the Baptist has been put to death, beheaded by Herod. After John the Baptist was beheaded and died, the disciples of John buried his body and then went and told Jesus. Those who were proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven were vulnerable. Their lives were at risk. The Herods of this world could lop your head off in an instant. Jesus hears this news and withdraws to a solitary place. We can only imagine he was seeking some solace and solitude and time alone and time away. But here come the crowds.

The way Jesus responds when the crowds come tell so much about who Jesus is. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom. When the crowd came, Jesus saw the large crowd and had compassion on them. If he came to the place for solitude, for solace, to be alone, or to be away, that is not what he got. And yet instead of being bitter, complaining, trying to hide or ignore the needs, we see Jesus as the one who came to be the servant of all. Seeing the crowds, he had compassion for them. He healed the sick.

This moment in the life of Jesus points clearly to the tremendous truth that Jesus cared for the whole person. He cared for people's physical well being. He healed the sick. And then when the disciples came to him with news that they were in a remote place...that it was getting late...that there was a crowd of people at this late hour in this remote place...and then when the disciples came to him and said, "Send the crowds away, so they can go the villages and buy themselves some food", Jesus said, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." The disciples are quick to point out the problem. "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish."

What follows is so important it is the one miracle Jesus does that appears in all four of the gospels. Jesus took the bread and the fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks, he blessed the bread and then he broke the bread. He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people, and they all ate and were satisfied. That in itself is an amazing miracle. That in itself is an incredible miracle. But there's more. Really, there's more. There are twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. While we don't know if the number twelve has any particular significance, you can't help but think of twelve disciples who said to Jesus, "Send the crowds away. There isn't enough food for them." And now there are how many baskets left over? I wonder if those twelve disciples didn't each pick up a basket of leftovers...and knowing who had blessed that bread, knowing who had broken that bread, I wonder if they didn't each pick up a basket of leftovers and carry it with them. Friends, those weren't baskets of leftovers. Those were baskets of bestovers. Indeed, those were baskets of blessedovers.

What would you do if you had a basket of those bestovers, those twelve baskets filled to the full with all the leftovers from that miraculous feeding of 5,000? Is it possible that a disciple with a basket of bestovers would see a hungry person and feed them, or find a thirsty person and give them something to eat, or meet a stranger and give them a warm welcome, or come upon a naked person and clothe them, or take time to care for a sick person, or seek out a prisoner just to visit them and show some love and concern. Isn't that just about the whole point of being disciples? Our lives get filled to overflowing by Jesus. There are baskets full of bread left over, and there are baskets full of healing, and there are baskets full of his kindness and compassion, and there are definitely huge baskets of forgiveness that are showered upon us, grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy, the steadfast love of the Lord that never ceases, the God who promises to never leave us or forsake us, baskets and baskets of blessings so rich, so abundant, so plentiful, that they not only fill our lives, they leave us with leftovers...they leave us with bestovers...they leave us with blessedovers. There were twelve baskets that day in the remote place where Jesus fed the five thousand. There were twelve disciples for those twelve baskets. The ones who had been blessed now had the opportunity to be the ones who shared the blessing with others.

Today Jesus is taking bread in his hands. He is blessing it. He is giving thanks for it. He is breaking it. He is giving it to us. After we have eaten our full of his grace, of his mercy, of his love, of his forgiveness, of his kindness, of his compassion, of his healing, of his wholeness, of his everlasting and eternal love, after we have eaten our full, I wonder if there will be any leftovers? I wonder if there will be any bestovers? I wonder if there will be any blessedovers? I wonder if there will be any disciples who rise from this table filled to overflowing, and who will walk out of this room with a basket of bestovers.

The story is told of a father and son living in New York City who had a Saturday afternoon free. It was a beautiful day, so they decided to go to Central Park. As they headed out the mom called to them, "Have a great time. And would you mind picking up a pizza on the way home. We'll have that for dinner." They went to the park. They walked and talked. The sun was shining and it was glorious. They watched families, children playing in the water and running down the hills, lovers holding hands, people paddling boats, picnics being enjoyed. It was just a perfect father/son outing. Toward the end of the day, a homeless man approached them. The homeless man looked at them and said, "Can you spare some change?" On this day, on this perfect day, the father and son were absolutely filled with the blessing and goodness of life, so they respond with generosity. In fact, they not only grabbed the change in their pockets, they grabbed all their money and held it out to the homeless man. The father said, "Take what you need."

The eyes of the homeless man light up. He has hit the jackpot. Take what you need? He takes every last penny and then quickly moves away. The father and son stare at each other, shrug their shoulders, and then laugh. He took what he needed. It sort of adds to the splendor of the day. Chuckling to themselves they turn and head home. They have not gone very far when something occurs to the father. The pizza. They were supposed to bring a pizza home. And now they have given all their money to the homeless man. They look back and see the homeless man about a hundred yards away. Shaking their heads they walk back to him. The father begins to explain, and the whole time he is thinking this is too crazy. He tells about the pizza, about the mom asking them, about how they have given all their money, how they are broke, and finally, swallowing his pride the father says, "Can you spare some change." The homeless man looks at them for a second, not sure if he is really hearing what he is hearing, and then a grin breaks out on his face. He pulls every last penny out of his pockets, holds his hands out to the father, and says, "Take what you need."

We are about to come to a table where Jesus holds out his hands, where Jesus stretches his arms, a table where Jesus empties himself completely and says to broken and hurting people like you and me, “Take what you need.” And right after we take what we need, right after we take from the fullness of his love and are filled and filled and filled to overflowing, right after we take what we need, we will walk out into a world of broken and hurting people. Dear friends, take the bestovers with you. And when you see a person in need, when you know of a pain or a sorrow, when you encounter the least of these, when you run across a person longing for hope and meaning and purpose, hold out that basket of leftovers...no, those aren't leftovers, that basket is full of bestovers...hold out that basket of bestovers. There is plenty of God's love to go around. Tell others about Jesus and his incredible and amazing and gentle and tender love. Hold out that basket filled with bestovers, filled with the love of Jesus Christ, and say to each and every person you meet, “Take what you need.”