

# Take, bless, break

## A sermon on Luke 9:10–17

Michele Rizoli

**T**he Evansons were out of our league. We were a plain old missionary family coming from rural New Hamburg, Canada, and they were über-educated university professors from glamorous Colorado, USA. But as she so often did when newcomers arrived in Brazil, my mom took the Evansons under her wing. She picked them up at the airport and then helped them find a place to live, furniture, schools for the kids, and so on. For all I know, she may even have helped them decide what their names should be in Portuguese; some names don't translate well.

As a fifteen-year-old, I didn't worry much about what Mom was up to all day. It was what she did at supper that day that was

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mortifying. She invited the Evansons to our house to eat with us. It was obvious that she hadn't planned to have visitors. Her menu for that evening was one of the plainest meals in her repertoire, straight from her humble life on the farm: bean soup and apple pie. Just picture it: white beans and chunks of white bread floating in a white milk base. Then just before we ate it, we'd sprinkle cinnamon on top—one last weird culinary touch. It was a good soup, but to the uninitiated it lacked visual appeal. It's a soup you'd think twice

about setting in front of your family, to say nothing of serving it to important visitors.

But my mom—whose name was Grace, by the way—didn't care about appearances. Her humble menu did not limit her hospitality, because it wasn't about food. It was about welcome. She improvised: put a little more milk in, broke up some more bread, cut the pie into smaller portions and voilà!—enough for a crowd! Her table boasted no place settings, no centerpieces, not

even a soup tureen. Martha Stewart would not have approved. We said a prayer (how embarrassing!), and then the university professors with their three kids crowded around the table with our lowly missionary family—and ate that soup like it was a feast.

About thirty years later, when my mother died, the Evansons sent a lovely condolence card. Do you know what they remembered best? That anemic-looking soup. When they were strangers, Mom's way of treating them like family made a lasting impression on them. You just never know what will happen when you open up to strangers, when you eat with them and include them in community.

We have another example of that hospitality in our scripture reading today. I wonder what people remembered about that day out close to Bethsaida, when Jesus fed an army of people. It was definitely memorable: all four Gospels include the story (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). The event was also influential in early Christianity. The way it is written—telling how Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it—ties the story to the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. To this day when we get together to be church, we gather around a simple shared meal in which bread is broken and blessed in Jesus' name.

There is a lot to see in this story, as in all biblical narratives. We hear echoes of God feeding the Israelites in the desert with manna. And there is the miracle itself. Was the miracle that so little food went such a long way? Or did the people have a change of heart and stop being stingy with what food they had? Did Jesus just get the potluck going? Was it the miracle of a random crowd becoming community by sharing a meal together? The early church probably preserved this account in scripture because it was all of these and more.

What I see in this story, and call our attention to today, is Jesus demonstrating the true nature of hospitality. Hospitality is welcoming strangers. It is often unplanned and unpredictable, it comes from an attitude of open invitation, it often includes food, and it is an abundant blessing to all involved.

Let's back up a little. As Luke tells it, Jesus had only recently sent out his disciples on a mission trip to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. The disciples weren't supposed to take along any provisions but instead were to count on whatever hospitality

they found along the way, staying in people's homes and moving from place to place. They did just that, and they came back on sort of a high, wanting to debrief. So they picked up and went away from the crowds to tell Jesus all about their ministry, without interruptions.

But their retreat didn't go as planned. The crowds followed Jesus and interrupted the meeting. The debriefing had to give way to teaching and healing. (I probably would have gently negotiated another time for the crowd to come back—when I could be better prepared.) Dealing with crowds of needy people was not on the agenda. But Luke tells us that Jesus welcomed them anyway, and

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spoke to them about the kingdom of heaven, and healed those who needed to be healed. I'm thinking the disciples were probably helping Jesus; after all, on their mission trip they had just learned more about how to minister.

Before they knew it, it was time for supper. Time flies when you're doing God's work. They were out in the middle of nowhere, the sun was going down, and a lot of people were still milling around. Jesus' training seems to have had an effect, and the disciples showed some sensitivity to people's needs. They were probably also remembering all the times

strangers had offered them food in the recent past, so they saw it as their responsibility to make sure these people were fed. They really wanted to practice hospitality.

The problem was, the disciples put their heads together to try to figure out what to do, and they came up with nothing. Well, almost nothing. Somebody scrounged up a couple of fish and some bread, but that wouldn't do much good. They just were not in a position to feed anyone, let alone a crowd. That would take much more planning, a proper location, an industrial kitchen, some formal assessments, perhaps a fundraiser or two. Then they could begin to do some triage: figure out who was most in need, allocate resources, set up a food bank, and so on. The thing to do was delegate, send all these people back into town, and let someone else feed them. We can imagine them thinking, *I can't do it.*

*Let someone else who is better prepared do it.* So they explained the problem to Jesus and asked him if he would kindly dismiss everyone, tell them the service was over.

But it was not in Jesus' nature to send people away. He just couldn't help it; he was a welcoming person under all circumstances. Maybe he also sensed an opportunity to turn a crowd into community, a chance to live out God's idea of abundance and hospitality. You can feed them, he said. But the disciples still couldn't see a solution that didn't involve a monetary transaction. They didn't have any money, so obviously the people would need to go to town and use their own. The disciples were stuck in their reliance on material resources. They hadn't yet learned all they needed to know about God's economy.

Jesus said, "It's true that you don't have money, but you have *food*, don't you?" Then he proceeded to show how to welcome and feed people you don't know, people who have interrupted your plans with their needs, people who aren't going away. You start with what you have. You take it. You place it before God. You bless it. You share it. You break it. Take it, bless it, break it, and then watch God work.

The disciples divided 5000 people into smaller, more manageable groups, and set about passing out food. (Mennonites might see it as a miracle that they could organize so many people without forming a committee!) The people weren't asked to line up so that Jesus could hand each one some bread and fish. The disciples didn't organize a one-on-one meeting with Jesus. Nor were the disciples given first dibs. The people were grouped as equals sharing a meal. Strangers became neighbours in this kingdom way of doing things. The story also mentions baskets of bread. Apparently other volunteers were passing around food among the groups. No hierarchy, no turns, just equal sharing of the work and the food and the fellowship. You know how it is when a good potluck gets going?

I imagine scattered groups of people. Some are sitting by the olive grove watching the sun go down. Some are gathered around that woman who keeps following Jesus, ever since he healed her. Others are down by the stream washing up. Others are perched on rocks, dangling their feet and watching volunteers moving back and forth between the groups, giving out food. Everyone is visit-

ing, discussing what Jesus meant about the kingdom of God, reliving the details of the healings they witnessed or experienced.

Because the work is spread out, no one really notices until the end that there is so much food. It's only when they are cleaning up that they realize that twelve baskets of food are left. Twelve, like the tribes of Israel, like the first disciples. That number is a nice final touch, God's signature on the whole thing. They had more than enough—abundantly far more than all they could have asked or imagined—and God had brought it about.

People came away from that experience changed. They kept retelling the story. They kept replicating it. It became a ritual, a tradition, a way of reminding themselves: *So this is the power of eating together, of sharing resources, of trusting God, of living a life of welcome.*

My church in Toronto has had some discussions about how to be more welcoming, and I've heard such conversations in other church settings. I think it's great for congregations to be concerned about hospitality, but I sometimes wonder whether we're

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making it too complicated. My mother, Grace, almost instinctively welcomed people into her home and her circle of friendship. On her retirement from the mission field, her guest book listed more than 3000 entries—and she would continue to host guests for another fifteen years. Hospitality was her special gift, but being hospitable was also in her nature as a Christian.

Maybe we could start to be a more welcoming church by just being more welcoming people in general. The opportunities are everywhere: to slip over so someone can sit beside me on the bench, to make room at the cafeteria table for someone who always sits

alone, just to say hi to someone I don't know yet, to try to sense and respond to the needs of those around me.

Maybe we also need to lower our high standards and let God do a little bit of the work too. A few years ago, Florence joined our congregation in Toronto. She had come from Uganda, and we planned a party for her, to welcome her. I distinctly remember

being embarrassed about how few people showed up, like we were doing so little. But it turned out that Florence had never had a party that was just for her. She was overjoyed. She told us that she felt totally loved and welcomed, and she was. God used a party that had struck me as less than perfect to embrace Florence and make her feel she belonged in our community.

At its heart, as modeled by Jesus, hospitality is not about a well-made plan. It's not about inviting friends over for a dinner party. It's not about what we see on the Home and Garden channel or at a nice hotel. Hospitality is about welcoming the stranger, taking even a little bit of our friendship, our food, our listening ears, our helping hands, and entrusting them to God to multiply exponentially. It is about building a wider community. Take, bless, break. Hospitality is taking what we have, no matter how little, and blessing it by presenting it to God, and breaking it to share. It is part of our identity, our nature, as followers of Jesus.

### **About the author**

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