

World Food Day

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In Matthew 14:13–21, Jesus performs one of his most well-known miracles: He feeds a crowd of over five hundred people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. While this is truly memorable, what hit me in this reading is what Jesus says to his disciples before he performs this miracle: “You give them something to eat.” Jesus is talking not just to his disciples, but to all of us: “You give them something to eat.”

How many of you have been hungry? I don’t mean the “I’m hungry so I’m going to look in the cupboard or fridge and see what I want to eat” hungry. Or the “I’m hungry for something and I need to go to the store and figure out what I want to eat: hungry. These are the “hungry” with which I’m familiar. By the grace of God, I have never experienced the hunger of not knowing where my next meal would come from.

When I was in my mid-twenties, if you had told me that I would be working in the state welfare office, my response would have been a startled, “What welfare office?” I knew nothing about welfare, nothing about being poor, and nothing about being hungry. I might have been aware that some people with whom I went to school received free or reduced lunches, but it wasn’t something that I really thought about.

Then at age twenty-four—pregnant, single, and with no job—I found myself at the local welfare office, where I applied for AFDC, Food Stamps, and Mainecare. I remember feeling numb, a kind of curious “Oh, this is where I am now” feeling. I didn’t feel shame until I went to the grocery store and had to take out my book of food stamps and tear out the amount needed to give to the cashier with other people behind me in line.

According to [USDA.gov](https://www.usda.gov), the Food Stamps Plan was implemented in 1939 by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration while America was in the throes of the Great Depression. I don’t know if President Roosevelt felt that Jesus was telling him, “You give them something to eat.” But he heard about the bread lines and lack of jobs, and he knew that starving people would not vote for him. So he enacted several pieces of legislation that still exist today, and he fed people. Was it a political decision? Of course it was. Access to food has always been a political tool. This program ended in 1943 due to “improved conditions” across the country, but it is estimated that it fed twenty million people in the first four years.

The 1939 Food Stamp Act has been revised many times. Did you know that at some point, people had to purchase their food stamps? People “on relief” bought orange stamps and received blue stamps for every dollar of orange stamps purchased, resulting in a gain of \$1.50 of food benefit for every dollar spent. In 1964, broadening the access to food was part of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. In 1967 the Food Stamp Act was amended to give more resources to children and people over age 65. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 removed the purchase requirement and tightened up eligibility requirements. The food stamps program is now called SNAP: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Somewhere along the way, probably even before Jesus's time, the term "worthy poor" came into use. Somehow it was decided that some people are deserving of food assistance but other people are not, that being poor and not having enough to eat or to feed your family is shameful and your fault. Given this common way of thinking, I am struck by Jesus saying, "You give them something to eat" rather than "You give some of them something to eat."

Ken Warner talked earlier about the Machias Area Food Pantry, how it operates and how many people it serves. Today the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, so no state can pay less than \$7.25—unless, like wait staff, you work for tips and earn just \$2.13 per hour. States can pay more per hour, but many states choose not to do so. Imagine earning only \$7.25 per hour.

In Maine the minimum wage is \$13.80 per hour. If you're lucky enough to have a full-time job at \$13.80 per hour, at forty hours per week you earn \$552—or \$2,373 a month before taxes. According to Google, a family of four has average expenses between \$7,000 and \$8,500 per month, and a family of four spends on average \$875 to 1,287 on groceries, depending on the children's ages. According to Maine.gov, a Maine family of four can receive a maximum of \$973 of SNAP benefits per month depending on income and assets. The numbers do not balance; a family of four ends up with a financial deficit every month.

Jesus talked about food a lot during his ministry. When he fed people, he didn't ask what their income level was, nor did he ask for anything in return. He broke bread and shared it with whomever he was with, whether it was two people or a crowd of over five hundred. He turned no one away. What does Jesus saying "You give them something to eat" mean to you?