

Twenty Years of Food

*“Jesus got them all to sit down in groups of fifty or a hundred – they looked like a patchwork quilt of wildflowers spread out on the green grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke and gave the bread to his disciples, and the disciples in turn gave it to the people. He did the same with the fish. They all ate their fill. The disciples gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. More than five thousand were at the supper.”**

Several years ago, perhaps somewhat grudgingly, I came to the conclusion that the mission of Loaves & Fishes was about food. This admission not only clarified my own role at Loaves, but helped to order our priorities.

Don't take my word for it, ask anyone on the streets of Sacramento what Loaves & Fishes is about – feeding hungry people, they would say. Ask media reporters – a soup kitchen, they would say. Ask a Loaves & Fishes volunteer – cooking and serving in the dining room, they would say. Ask a friend from out of town who has never heard of Loaves & Fishes – it must be about giving food to the poor, they would say.

I used to remind people that Loaves & Fishes does a lot more than just feed the hungry. I'd ask, did they know about Maryhouse, our daytime shelter for homeless women? And Mustard Seed, our school for homeless children? And MercyClinic, our medical clinic? And Friendship Park? And the washhouse? And library? And jail visitation? No, they never knew. They just knew about the food. Deep down, I, too, believe Loaves & Fishes is all about food.

Food for survival. Food for hospitality. Food for celebration. Food for sharing.

David Grooman taught me about food for survival. In the mid 80's David was evicted because he lost his job and couldn't pay his rent. He was put out on the street. His first thought, he told me, was that because he was now homeless, he would soon die. But he didn't die; he just spent all his days walking and his nights in William Land Park. In his travels, he found an apple here, some discarded food there, and while he realized he was not dying, he was always hungry. After about three weeks, someone told him about the free noon meal at Loaves & Fishes. He arrived several hours early and joined the line on North 12th St. (Those were the days before Brother Martin's

Courtyard or Friendship Park, when Loaves & Fishes guests waited for hours in line on North 12th Street without access to water or toilets. Thank God, those days are forever gone.) David told me he was so famished and weak with hunger when he arrived that he had to cling to the chain link fence to keep from falling down. He said Loaves & Fishes saved his life.

Food for hospitality

No sooner do we enter the home of a friend or relative than we hear words to this effect: “You must be hungry, would you like something to eat? What would you like to drink?” We are made to feel welcome. We are a visitor, and the offer of food establishes the roles of the host and the guest.

And so it is at Loaves. We are the hosts, and the homeless and hungry are our guests. Understanding this guest relationship is important because it transforms and elevates the status of the person in need, and it affirms again what every holy scripture from every religion prescribes for its followers: the practice of hospitality.

Our coffee breakfast program in Friendship Park, our full breakfast for women and children at Maryhouse, our midmorning snack for children at Mustard Seed, and our hot, home-cooked noon meal in the dining room represent our hospitable relationship with our homeless guests.

Food for celebration

Our culture dictates – I’m sure it is true with all cultures – that certain holidays should be celebrated with family and food. Food that is traditional and specially prepared. Turkey or lamb are well-known examples. But there are many others. For example, in my childhood, it was ambrosia. When the ambrosia was served, it was truly the sign that these American-born French-Canadian family members were celebrating Christmas Day.

Loaves & Fishes cannot do less. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King Day, Easter Sunday, Fourth of July, Sister Nora’s Day are all celebrated with specially prepared traditional food served to our guests, who become our family for the occasion.

Food for sharing

In the early days of Loaves & Fishes, our food storage was located in an oversized refrigerator and a few closets that we called storerooms. Now we have a huge warehouse on North C St., more than a quarter-acre in size, with a walk-in freezer and cold box, all filled with food and supplies of every description. Almost everything in the warehouse has been donated. Some from friends and supporters of Loaves & Fishes, some as the result of industry overproduction, some from Senior Gleaners, purchased for the cost of transportation, some purchased in bulk quantities for pennies on the dollar, and some from food drives organized by community organizations.

It requires a large food warehouse to support the production of more than a third of a million meals a year in the dining room, to provide the ton of sugar a month Friendship Park needs for its coffee breakfast program, and to provide the napkins, utensils, cleaning supplies, and the myriad other items needed throughout the Loaves & Fishes complex.

But the warehouse does more than just support Loaves & Fishes. It supports dozens of other groups dedicated to serving the survival needs of the poor, and each week their pickups or vans are loaded up with our surplus food and supplies. Perhaps 20 years from now, they too will have their own warehouse operation and will be able to share with others.

Loaves & Fishes is about food. Food for survival. Food for hospitality. Food for celebration. Food for sharing.

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The friends, supporters, and volunteers of Loaves & Fishes gathered here today in celebration of our 20th-year anniversary are like the disciples of Jesus who prepare and serve food to our guests so they can eat their fill, and then they gather up the baskets of leftovers to share with others.

I've been asked to remind you that refreshments will be served after this prayer service, and all are invited to come. It simply proves my point, and I say it again: Loaves & Fishes is all about food.

* Mark 6. *The Message: The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs*, Eugene H. Peterson.