

1.

FEED THE HUNGRY

For a time, we were very, very poor. I thought that time would never end. It had started soon after Rosie was born; I was sick, and Michael could not find work anywhere. It's a unique hell being almost done with a master's degree and then not being able to go back to school because your wife is so sick. The cheap jobs don't want to hire you for fear you'll leave for something for which you're better qualified, but the good jobs don't want to hire you because you're not qualified yet.

As for me, my health was fair one day and terrible the next. I had developed fibromyalgia, perhaps due to a series of emergency surgeries I'd had. First my appendix ruptured, then a few months later I suffered a bowel obstruction, and then my gall bladder needed to be taken out the following year. I'm told people often develop fibromyalgia after a series of physical traumas to the body like that. Fibromyalgia has been recognized as a chronic medical condition for only a relatively short time, and we're still not sure exactly how it happens or how to fix it. When I was first diagnosed, many doctors still thought that it wasn't real, it was all in my head, and I was crazy. I almost believed them.

When I got pregnant unexpectedly, I went into remission for a time. I'm told that it's also common for some chronic illnesses to disappear under the influence of pregnancy hormones. Then Rosie was born via traumatic caesarean section after a horrific twenty-seven-hour labor with a con artist posing as a midwife. As he was cutting me open, the doctor laughed at me for trusting the locally known swindler. Post-traumatic depression settled in not long after our daughter's birth. When the pregnancy hormones began to wear off, the fibromyalgia came back.

We had no money, no job prospects, no hope. We were living in a dilapidated apartment building on a dreary street in a bad neighborhood, separated from friends and most of both of our families. We paid the rent with a small check my grandmother sent monthly as a gift. We lived off food stamps and very little else.

There was not enough to eat. Every month I tried to carefully plan meals in advance, but I was never quite prudent enough. We bought sacks of brown rice, canned beans, whole bony chickens, and the most boring frozen vegetables. We would eat the chicken for two or three meals and then boil the bare bones for an insipid, fat-free stock we used for cooking the rice to give it a little more nutrition. I dreamed about having choices again, of the luxury of fast food or even a sit-down restaurant.

Once, in a month when we were especially poor, a neighbor gave us a box of food. We had done her a favor once upon a time, returning her phone when we found it on the ground where it fell out of her purse, so she returned the favor by helping us out when she got a job. She was working at a thrift store that didn't have a license to sell food, so when someone mistakenly donated a big box of food, she passed it along to us. It was mostly canned vegetables, which we went through quickly, but there were also three sacks of ripe potatoes. I didn't even know potatoes could get ripe. I thought they just slowly inflated with

water and carbohydrates under the ground and then stayed dry and rocklike until you cooked them. But potatoes do ripen and then they rot, and rotten potatoes stink. These potatoes were close to rotting.

We worked at those potatoes. We ate them baked and boiled and scalloped. I spent some of our monthly government benefits on butter and sour cream to make the most of them. But there were only three of us, and we could not eat three sacks of potatoes faster than potatoes could age in our humid kitchen.

We found ourselves with something that we hadn't had in a long time: more food than we could eat before it spoiled. Meanwhile, downtown, my friend Molly found herself with the opposite problem: a big crowd of people to feed and nothing to give them to eat.

There was going to be a polar vortex. Most of the time, in winter, it's miserable outdoors in Steubenville at night, but the temperatures stay in the twenties or thirties. You could survive living outside if you slept during the day and stayed moving all night. It would be painful but not deadly. And there is a homeless shelter to sleep in, though it's a dangerous place, and showing up early enough to get a bed is tricky if you work, as most homeless people do in Steubenville and everywhere else. But the polar vortex was predicted to bring the temperature down to far below zero, even during the day. Frostbite, they said, would start within ten minutes. Death would come soon after that for anyone unfortunate enough to be outside.

Molly and her husband, Bill, made arrangements with the owner of an after-school program for teenagers downtown. Since schools were going to be closed during the polar vortex, he wouldn't need his building for the after-school get-togethers, so he handed the keys to Molly and Bill for them to use it as a temporary warming center to help the homeless survive.

Molly and Bill had even less of an idea about what they were getting into than I did when I first came to Steubenville to study philosophy. From the moment they opened their temporary shelter, Molly and Bill had far more guests than they'd expected. Many of them were homeless, but not all. It turns out that there were a lot of people living in Steubenville who had housing, technically speaking, but were vulnerable to the cold anyway. There were people who had a house or apartment but the furnace was broken and the landlord couldn't be bothered to have it fixed. There were people who had a working furnace but couldn't afford to pay an old utility bill and the gas was shut off. There were also people whose houses depended on an oil furnace but they'd run out of fuel oil for the winter and couldn't afford more. All these people had been nailing blankets over the windows, sleeping in their coats, and hoping for the best. When they found out there was a warming center in town, they flocked there for shelter and stayed all night.

In addition to people with no housing and no working furnace, Molly and Bill's one-night makeshift warming center was also visited by Steubenville's prostitutes. These women were used to being outside on the street all day. They had never before had a place downtown where they were welcome to duck inside, enjoy a cup of coffee, and get warm for free. They even had friendly hosts to talk with.

None of these people brought their own lunch, of course. So Molly got on Facebook and asked friends to bring her a coffee maker, a teapot, a hot plate, and something for everyone to eat. And that was how it all began.

The polar vortex came and went. Michael, Rosie, and I hunkered down in our apartment, and Molly and Bill passed out hot drinks and bowls of soup and tried to keep order at the crowded warming center. When it was over, they realized they just couldn't leave all these people in so much suffering after

befriending them for a weekend. So they decided to open the warming center nightly, after the children from the after-school program had gone home, just until spring came.

Molly got on Facebook every few days that winter, asking for warm food to share with her unexpected party. She started setting her posts to public without even thinking about it. Before long, total strangers were showing up at the warming center: strangers who brought her paper plates and bowls; bags of salad; fruit; and slow cookers of soup, stew, and chili. And I wanted to help so badly.

One of the most painful parts of being poor is feeling that you don't have a purpose. Everyone wants to feel helpful, but poor people don't have a lot of material goods to contribute, and it can make a person feel like a burden instead of a member of a community. I would have loved to be one of the helpful neighbors bringing food and dishes to the warming center. But I didn't have any paper plates and bowls, or any money to buy them. I didn't have any soup, stew, or chili. And I didn't have the means to make them. But I had potatoes.

I knew I couldn't just bring the warming center raw potatoes. Molly didn't have an oven in the building. But I didn't have a whole lot of ingredients to bake a casserole or make a stew. At the beginning of the month I'd have had canned milk, onions, and stock to make a potato casserole of some sort, but at this time of the month I only had beans, rice, those potatoes, and one package of sour cream I hadn't gotten to.

The potatoes were going to be ruined if I waited more than a few days to do something with them. Then I thought about how comforting it can be to open up a nice baked potato on a cold day, and that was my inspiration. I threw the potatoes in the oven and baked them; then I stuffed them in an insulated bag, packed a separate bag with the tub of sour cream, and took the potatoes downtown on the bus. Thankfully the bus wasn't

very crowded—a hot sack of potatoes needs its own seat and I couldn't have afforded the fare—and the driver let the potatoes ride for free.

When I got to the warming center, I opened the bag, and there was that rush of warm air I'd imagined sharing with cold, hungry people. I set ten warm baked potatoes on the counter. They were all eaten within minutes.

I felt happy the rest of the day—as if I really belonged somewhere. I'd really been able to contribute to other people's comfort and happiness. And at the same time, I felt guilty for being so happy. The potatoes hadn't been purchased by me, after all. They were a gift in the first place. I just exposed them to heat.

But then it occurred to me: potatoes are always a gift. There's never been a potato that wasn't a gift. To some people, God gives land and the means to grow potatoes. To some, he gives money and access to stores or restaurants. To others, he sends a sack of potatoes through a friend. But food is always a gift from God. The rest of us just help pass it around.

This is the state we live in as human beings. We live in a world full of resources, full of good things to eat. Plants and animals that can be made into food are all around us, and all of them are gifts from God. But these gifts are not distributed evenly. That's the part of the job God left for us. And there are multiple different ways we have to do this. We certainly ought to participate in politics and do our best to make a world where few go hungry in the first place. But the poor are always going to be with us. We're always going to end up with people in our community who just need someone to bring them something to eat. And that's good. That's a mercy that God has given to us.

Think about all the ways that food factors into our lives—not just as nourishment for our bodies but for the cultural, psychological, and spiritual realms of human life as well. Imagine how cranky you get when you're hungry, and how good it is for

your mental health to indulge in a treat during a stressful time. Think about the joy associated with a turkey at Thanksgiving and a lamb or a ham with boiled eggs on Easter Sunday. Think of the fasts and abstinence we observe at different times in the Church to remind us of the necessity of repentance. Imagine the myriad foods associated with Christmas and how the feast looks different in all the diverse cultures where Christ is worshipped: special breads and cookies, a feast with seven kinds of fish and myriad pastas, turkey and plum pudding, tamales, fried chicken.

Remember how privileged we are to have the Holy Eucharist. God could have shared his own being with us any way he wished, but he chose this one: a sacred ritual starting with bread and wine, two foods nearly every culture has in some form. He nourishes our whole being in the most intimate, scandalously loving way—through a meal.

Food is not only a physical necessity. It nourishes our whole being—mind, soul, and body. We live in a world full of food, but that food is not evenly distributed. That's our job. Giving food to hungry people is a sacred privilege, because when we give others food, we get to help God complete creation. We get to take the gifts he created to sustain us, his children, and give them to the people he meant to sustain. We feed their whole beings, not just their stomachs. It's a simple and primal way to make another person feel part of a community, to feel welcome and cared for. And it's so often a joyful thing for the giver as well.

HOW TO FEED THE HUNGRY

- Feeding the hungry doesn't have to be an expensive or lengthy activity, but it should be a thoughtful one. Even if you're only making a quick meal for a family member, you shouldn't do it on autopilot, because what you're doing is sacred. When you feed someone, you're fulfilling your vocation as a human being and a Christian, just as a priest fulfills part of his vocation when he celebrates Mass.
- In general, the needier the person you're feeding, the more care you should take. If you're throwing a dinner party for well-to-do friends, they can always get another meal on the way home if they don't like what you served, but poorer friends might not have that luxury. If you're packing a lunch for your spouse to take to work and they don't like it, and if they have the money, they might just buy another lunch. But if you pack a lunch for a homeless person, it might be the only thing they get to eat all day, whether they like it or not. So be extra careful. Every time you feed someone, you perform a Work of Mercy. But feeding the neediest people should be done with the most care.
- If you would like to perform this Work of Mercy by giving to a soup kitchen or food pantry, the most useful donation is usually cash. That way those who manage the place can shop for what they need. If you'd like to donate food, their most needed items are usually shelf-stable proteins such as beans, canned fish, and shelf-stable milk. They also can usually use wholesome snacks such as granola bars, produce such as cans of low-sodium vegetables, and shelf-stable juice with no corn syrup. If you don't know what they need at a given time, you can usually call and ask. Donate brands you'd eat yourself; don't be cheap just because people are desperate.

- If you would like to give something to a beggar you meet, some people don't like to give cash. If you are one of them, you could keep a few gift cards to local grocery stores, gas stations, or fast-food restaurants in your wallet to give away. If you see the same person asking for help often, you might offer to take them to lunch or grocery shopping. Or you could bring them a lunch. If you give them food, make sure it's nourishing and appealing, something you'd like to find in a packed lunch yourself. Bear in mind that they might not have a place to keep food refrigerated. Also remember that a lot of very poor and homeless people have bad teeth, so soft fruit such as peaches or bananas might be more welcome than apples. Snacks with lots of sharp bits such as nuts and sunflower seeds are harder to eat than crackers and peanut butter.
- Please don't ever give away expired or recalled food. A food pantry can't give that away and the soup kitchen can't cook it, so you've just made more work for them. And if they don't catch it and accidentally give it to someone, you may have made someone sick. Remember, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that the people we feed are Christ in disguise. Give him your best food—food you wouldn't be ashamed to serve to a dear friend.

Food is a sacred gift that nourishes us in every aspect of our being: body, mind, and soul. It's a pleasure that is intimately wound up in our cultural experience. There is food everywhere, but for many people it's not readily available. It's our job, as the hands and feet of Christ, to change that. To feed the hungry is to take part in God's work of creation. It's a simple act, a joyful one, and it binds us in a powerful way to our community. That is a gift we should all be grateful to accept.

Lord Jesus,
You are the bread of life and the source of all
sustenance.
Please help me to serve you in my neighbors
who are hungry.
Help me remember that in doing so, I am only
a servant
joyfully arranging a banquet you have already
prepared.
In your most holy name I pray.
Amen.