



*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; YOU give them something to eat." (Matthew 14:13-16)*

Many Christmas traditions revolve around food. Special recipes handed down through generations. Baking cookies and candy. Certain foods served on special dishes that belonged to a great grandparent. Stories told around the Christmas dinner table. When I was a child, a neighbor used to bring some kind of ethnic holiday bakery to our house every year like clockwork. My dad always commented on how dry it was, but we ate it nonetheless.

Being a pastor dictates when and what my family eats at Christmas time. On Christmas Eve it's always potato cheese soup and bread for lunch before I head to church, and a finger food buffet of assorted cheeses, crackers, shrimp, sausage and cookies late at night after I get home. Christmas Day brings the bigger meal around the traditional table, served on the china we received when we got married.

This year my family's food-related traditions changed because of the circumstances. Maybe yours did, too. Even so, most of us probably didn't have to worry about a food shortage. But that isn't true for everyone. We see it every day in the news. Long lines at local food banks; another consequence of the pandemic. Many are folks who have not needed the services of a food bank until now. But food insecurity is a fast-growing concern across the country. For example:

- According to one estimate by researchers at Northwestern University, food insecurity more than doubled as a result of the economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus outbreak, hitting as many as 23% of American households.
- An analysis by the Brookings Institute conducted earlier this summer found that in late June, 27.5% of households with children were food insecure - meaning some 13.9 million children lived in a household characterized by child food insecurity.
- The rate of food insecurity is higher for those without a high school diploma (27%), and adults with disabilities experience more than two times the rate of food insecurity as adults who do not have a disability.
- And the problem is hardly unique to the U.S. According to the United Nations World Food Program the global pandemic has the chance to double the number of people experiencing acute food insecurity, from 135 million in 2019 to 265 million in 2020.

What does that have to do with us? Well...

*“Feeding the hungry is an ethical imperative for the universal Church. The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.”*

*(Pope Benedict XVI)*

At First Church we have a long history of “cultivating a public conscience” about Jesus’ call to feed the hungry. Even in this time of pandemic we were able to continue our tradition of providing resources for hungry families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. I’m eager to see how much food our congregation has collected during the Reverse Advent Calendar activity, all of which will be delivered to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. Thanks to all of you for sharing your food with those who are hungry, and for living out your faith in the way Jesus taught his first disciples.

Pastor Chuck

Let us pray. God of compassion, help us to see the face of Christ in those who are hungry, and in serving them to serve you. Give us generous hearts so that those living in poverty may have adequate food, shelter, and clothing. By your Spirit move us to affirm the dignity of all people and to work for just laws that protect the most vulnerable in our society; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.