

“Divine Leftovers”

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I have a strange dream. I dream that everyone comes to my house to visit. Everyone. Everyone I have ever known – relatives, friends and neighbors come knocking. I open my door to them all. The only thing I have to serve to them is leftovers from Thanksgiving dinner.

No, this is not a nightmare. I actually love this dream. In this dream, the house is big enough – no matter how many people enter it. People are happy in this dream. They eat, talk, and laugh. They say the leftovers are divine!

Where did this dream come from? What experiences produced it? It all began a long time ago. . .

My family and I moved to Tulsa in 1961. We attended Memorial Drive Methodist Church. Mr. Calhoun was the self-appointed greeter. He was there every Sunday as we climbed the front steps that seemed so very tall to me. He shook hands with Mom and Dad. He shook hands with me, and my younger sister and brother.

Mr. Calhoun always slipped a piece of Dentyne chewing gum into the hand of each child he greeted. It may not sound like much to you, but that act of kindness meant a lot to me. You see, sometimes I felt a bit like a leftover. Poor me! I had to share attention with my brother and sister. Mr. Calhoun helped me feel special and welcome. I can only imagine how the minister felt as he looked upon a congregation filled with children happily chewing away on Dentyne gum.

Mr. Calhoun didn't have very much money. He gave to us as he was able. It was important to him to contribute to the church. So, Mr. Calhoun was there every Sunday. He literally opened the door for us. That's hospitality.

I remember the interior of the small vestibule. There was a picture of Jesus on the wall directly opposite the church door. It's a very famous picture of Jesus standing outside of a wooden door and knocking. I asked my Mom about it. She told me that it was a picture of Jesus knocking at the door of our heart. I was a child of six. Mr. Calhoun opened the door for us. I wanted to open the door for Jesus.

I looked forward to attending Sunday school classes. I loved to hear the stories about Jesus. I remember looking at the picture in the vestibule and thinking about Jesus knocking. It made me think of the verse in Matthew that says:

Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who searches finds
and for everyone who knocks,
the door will be opened.

This is such a famous scripture that it is part of the popular culture. We often hear, “Ask and you shall receive.” Even if you weren’t raised in the Christian tradition, chances are you wrestled with this concept.

A person might look at this idea of asking and receiving, searching and finding, knocking and gaining entrance, and think that it is some mystical key to wish fulfillment. Being served leftovers probably isn’t high on the “ask” list. A feast might be. Is it possible to receive leftovers as an abundant feast?

I can honestly say that when I was a child I never really thought of leftovers as something undesirable – unless lima beans were involved. Mom works magic with food. Nothing goes to waste. Sometimes we have a [satisfying soup](#) or a [creative casserole](#). Imagination and love are the key ingredients. It wasn’t until I was nine and I had dinner at a friend’s house that I realized that some people think of leftovers as bad.

How can this be? I wondered. I watched and listened. Leftovers at my friends’ homes meant eating *exactly the same thing*. Juicy, grilled pork chops became reheated, *dry*, grilled pork chops. That’s not my mother’s leftovers!

What a gift my mother gave me! Food is more than nutrition. Food is an art form. There is something of the Divine in that.

My parents demonstrated to me during my childhood that people are creative. I remember that my mother accomplished this by making a little bit of money go a very long way. She sewed clothes for my sister, for me, and for herself. Mom re-covered our furniture. We

made our own ornaments for the Christmas tree with the beautiful pictures from Christmas cards saved from the previous year. Leftovers are the ingredients for a new creation.

My father sold encyclopedias for the Grolier Society for a while. Anytime I asked him a question he would say, “Look it up!” He read books all the time. So did my mom. So did I. Dinner table discussions included politics and religion. Dad pushed me to think about my questions, my assumptions and my opinions.

Dad also performed the maintenance on the family car and household appliances. We had nails, screws and tools in the garage. We could invent new things. We could build and rebuild. “Don’t waste anything. Use your head,” Dad would say. How could leftovers be a bad thing? Leftovers are inspiration.

Should we share with others only if we have the means to provide the newest and the freshest? Is anyone or anything truly “new?” What happens to us as a people if we keep to ourselves because we have a low opinion of what we have to offer? Isn’t *who we are* precisely the best we have to offer?

Hospitality often centers on food and meals. Eating is a very intimate activity. Sharing food and drink with another person creates a bond. This is why important life events include the sharing of food. Christian communion is an example of the sacred essence of dining together. People tend to carefully choose their meal partners. It should not be surprising that there are stories about who is welcome at the table.

There is a wonderful example that comes to us from the folklore of Turkey. A Muslim holy man named Nas Rudin lived during the 13th century. He was a very wise man. Nas Rudin often did foolish things to get people to think. Consider this story.

Nas Rudin goes to a rich man’s house for a feast. Nas Rudin arrives and knocks at the door. The servant who answers the door sees Nas Rudin standing before him, dressed in dirty, ragged clothes. Nas Rudin asks to be admitted to the feast. Nas Rudin is sent away because he is not dressed properly.

The next time the rich man holds a feast, Nas Rudin returns. He knocks at the door. The servant answers the door. Nas Rudin asks to be admitted to the feast. The servant sees Nas Rudin dressed in the finest of clothing. The rich man greets Nas Rudin and gives him the seat of honor at the large table. When the stew is served, Nas Rudin takes it and pours it on his clothing. His host exclaims, “Nas Rudin! Why are you pouring the food on your clothes?”

Nas Rudin replies, “When I came here before, I was sent away because of the clothes I was wearing. Now I am seated in the place of honor because of the clothes I am wearing. Obviously, it is the clothes that you invited to dinner. Therefore, I am feeding the clothes.”

Ask. Search. Knock. Nas Rudin does all of these things. The feast he attends reminds me of holiday gatherings. Sometimes our biggest hospitality challenge comes during the holidays. Acquaintances and business associates can sometimes be more easily tolerated than our own family. Of course, hospitality starts at home.

I learned a long time ago from my parents that creating a welcoming space is possible even when money is tight. Visitors know when a meal is prepared and shared in the spirit of joy and generosity.

I’ll never forget the year that we had a very mysterious guest at Thanksgiving. One day I arrived home from school. My mother whispered. “Mrs. Smith is upstairs in the extra bedroom. Your father says that there is some trouble with her husband. No one is supposed to know that she is here.” It was unusual to say the least. Mom and Dad had started a new business. I happened to know that the business wasn’t generating any profit. We were living off of our savings. My father believed that Mrs. Smith needed shelter for a few days. We took her in.

All Souls knows about hospitality. Congregation B’Nai Emunah’s synagogue was under construction for about two years. They needed a place to worship while waiting for the project to be completed. Our Jewish neighbors asked. They searched. When they knocked, this community of All Souls opened its heart and doors.

Our concept of hospitality is tested during the holidays. Holiday stories are frequently presented as miracle stories. They are inspirational. These stories teach us that love prevails against impossible odds. Faith, love, hope and joy are at the heart of the celebration – no matter what holiday tradition your family celebrates.

The story of Jesus feeding the multitude is known as a miracle story. Talk about a meal of Thanksgiving! Jesus has been ministering and preaching to a large crowd for hours and hours. He and his disciples are tired and hungry. Jesus doesn’t want to send the people away without feeding them. It’s a matter of hospitality. To this day, Middle Eastern culture considers hospitality a sacred duty.

What does Jesus ask of his disciples? He asks about the food supply. *He asks about the leftovers.* Jesus blesses the bread and the fish. Then, he tells the people to sit in small groups. He tells the disciples to distribute the food. Somehow, there is more than enough to go around – *for five thousand people.* What is the miracle?

The obvious answer is that a lot of food is produced from a small amount. Consider the possibility that the story is about more than a magic trick. Consider that the miracle is that Jesus hosts an incredible feast. A large crowd of people spends hours listening to him. Then, they eat together in small groups. Imagine! People share a meal who otherwise might not associate with each other. The meal sharing creates a bond.

Jesus feeds his disciples. He shows them – and us – the depth of connection we have to each other. In some ways, the disciples feel the continued presence of the crowd as an intrusion. Jesus is *their* teacher. *The disciples* have a special relationship with Jesus. Who is leftover in this situation? Divinity isn't located only in the food. Divinity isn't located only in Jesus.

Ask. Search. Knock.

Hospitality is an entire way of life. Exemplars include Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Harriet Tubman, and many others. We don't need to look long ago and far away for people like these. Human beings the world over continue to work tirelessly for a more hospitable society.

We know there are many dedicated people in our community who are living a life of deep hospitality. The Tulsa Interfaith Alliance, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry, Neighbor for Neighbor, and many other organizations are filled with such people – including All Souls people. We work with those who one might say are [treated](#) as society's leftovers. Our caring community understands that hospitality is based upon mutuality.

God is with us in our mutual caring. The Source of Life weaves all our stories into the one universal tale of journey.

Consider God *is* a verb, then God becomes:

Welcome, Eat, Breathe, Live, Love, Touch –
All are the names of the Divine.

As we do these things, we manifest the Divine. When we open the door to the stranger, the ill, the persecuted, the downtrodden, and our most difficult family member, we create an open space. When we look into the eyes, listen to the stories, and *commune* with people, we experience the Divine in them.

We can commune as we consume.

The dream happens.

Someone asks.

Someone searches.

Someone knocks.

Someone opens the door.

Abundance exists in the most unexpected forms.

Leftovers are Divine.