



It is the general expectation for us Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy, to go through college and then to a seminary institution to help prepare us for this wonderful human artform we call congregational ministry. But towards the end of that part of our education journey, we, like with many other career preparation paths, are expected to fulfill a year, and now sometimes, even two years' worth of an internship experience, where we hopefully gain some more hands-on learning, and perhaps put some of our Biblical studies and theology training and pastoral care-honing into actual practice.

Now part of the problem over the years, is that, understandably so, most congregations cannot afford to financially support an intern on top of the full-time pastor and other music and administrative staff, and so, more often than not, it is the more well-to do faith communities that bring in a seminary student: into a financial and surrounding setting of which may not be the future reality for that respective future pastor's calling. And so, for me, I was sent off to such a congregation in Dallas, Texas; to an area of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex that was not struggling, to put it mildly. We were only several blocks away from Southern Methodist University, again, a higher level of learning institution that was not trying to survive financially. We hardly ever had people stopping by the church, ringing the buzzer, asking for food. There might have been some random bags of non-perishable items, but no food pantry was kept at the building. There, quite simply, was not the frequent need in that surrounding neighborhood.

Now, part of my weekly routine at the congregation was a lunch meeting in my supervisor's office, the lead pastor of the church. And, of course, before each meal, we would do the usual prayer and blessing over the food and for our time together. But, whenever he prayed, he would directly quote the words from the Psalm we heard this morning: "The eyes of all wait upon you, O LORD, and you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing." Maybe it isn't the smartest thing to admit out loud, and I never had the guts to question him about it then, at least, but I will admit to you I struggled with those words. The summer before I was part of a Vacation Bible School at a church a few miles to the west of the seminary campus in Columbus, in the midst of a neighborhood that did struggled a variety of ways. That church not only had an active food pantry, but provided full-scale meals to the community on a weekly basis. And could we really look at those grandparents and parents and children, who did not always have a meal provided at home, could we really look at them and say that their food will be given in due season? Could we really go just over five miles to the south of the more well-to-do congregation, to the under-served South Dallas, and say that God satisfies the desire of every living thing? I know it's not always pastorally appropriate to question such things, but sometimes the faces and the stories for those who face hunger as an actual reality and not some theological or political talking point, sometimes it can be rather difficult to unsee those faces and unhear those stories.

Granted, the argument still remains that God and the Creation provide more than enough, but we humans still are not the best at sharing the bounty, to put it rather mildly. And yes, we should be incredibly proud about our own food pantry here and the generosity of so many of you to feed those in our surrounding neighborhood that faces its fair share of struggles. And the

church cannot revert back to the bully pulpit days of unleashing guilt and shame leading us to cower in our respective spiritual corners, wondering if whatever we do is not nearly good enough to the God who is trying so desperately much to ensure all God's children are cared for throughout their lifetime.

Over the years that more well-to-do congregation began to be more intentional about collecting food, offering financial support, even doing peanut butter drives, to a sister church in South Dallas to better equip them in their essential ministry of feeding and assisting those in more dire need. And doing so with courage and joy and love, because the church cannot be about adding further guilt. There's enough of that already in the world. The church cannot be about piling on more shame. Humanity has that more than covered. And we also cannot be about limiting questions and wonderings about Scripture and God and our role in carrying out the Gospel to those inside and outside church building walls, because we are all still trying how best to share our gifts and talents and the very bounty of God within our churches and homes and beyond.

And yet, through all struggles and shortcomings, through all our joys and triumphs, whether individually or the church as a whole, through it all, we forever cling to the ultimate holy refrain persistent throughout the Psalms and beyond, the first verse we heard from that aforementioned: "The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," even as we still try to find our own humble but most needed way, to not only share the bounty of the Creation, but the bounty of mercy and grace brought to life in Jesus Christ for you and throughout the world. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!