One sat in her car in the parking lot, crying because she didn’t have money to buy food for her family or put gas in her car. The other woman felt like she was having a terrible day, and on her birthday no less. Though she did have money to buy food and gas, her back hurt and she was very unhappy about the state of affairs in the world.

Before leaving for the grocery store, she prayed a simple prayer: “God, help me.”

She worked her way through the store, trying to be friendly and positive with everyone. When she reached the checkout line, something strange happened. The clerk rang up her items, and suddenly smiled.

“Congratulations, you’ve won a ham!” the clerk exclaimed.

The birthday girl with the bad back who had prayed for God’s help was not pleased. She didn’t like ham. To her, it looked and tasted like pink eraser. The saltiness made her feel bloated. Seeing how excited the clerk was, she accepted the ham and considered tossing it into the garbage or a field. She thought of it as “that [blank]-ing ham!”

As the birthday girl made her way through the parking lot, she bumped her cart into a rusty old car. The first woman—the one who was crying and couldn’t afford gas or food was in it. It turned out, the two women knew each other.

One was bestselling author Anne Lamott. The other was an old friend from years ago when they got sober together.

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1 Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts On Faith (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2006).
Seeing that her friend was crying, Anne asked about her predicament. Her friend hadn’t ever had to ask for help before, and wasn’t looking to become dependent on anyone. Anne insisted on giving her some money for gas, and had one more question, “Do you and your kids like ham?” “We love it,” her friend replied.

That blanking ham became something different. Anne wrote that “Maybe it was the ham of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Though it wasn’t anything like what she imagined when she prayed for God’s help, an unexpected sense of purpose emerged that day.

There are some songs, Bible passages, stories that I need to hear again and again. Perhaps you have some of your own. The Ham of God is one of those I shared here about two years ago and need to remind myself of repeatedly.

What about you? Do you struggle to feel comfortable without knowing where every meal, every dollar, every drop of water will come from when resources seem increasingly scarce? Presbyterian Churches are notorious over-planners. While I appreciate taking time to make thoughtful decisions, sometimes it borderlines on the absurd. We have committees to choose committees, and I have been involved in multiple meetings through the years in which we discussed how to plan spontaneity in worship.

We struggle to be open to unexpected blessings God could have in store for us.

Today’s Scripture lesson from Mark 6:30-44 tells the story of the Feeding of the 5,000. People of faith before us apparently viewed it as something we needed to hear repeatedly because it appears six times in the gospels. (In addition to multiple times in the Old Testament in which God provides for the Israelites in the desert).

In Mark 6, we encounter the disciples sharing reports of their ministry with Jesus. He had empowered them to feed and heal and spread the Good News and they are excited about the results. They had been working so hard, they hadn’t even had time to eat anything.

Jesus called them to rest, going away to a deserted place to recharge. Perhaps he would tell us to shut down our smart phones and other devices, to unplug for a while. He knew that his disciples could easily become enamored with their own supposed power and forget the true source just as we can convince ourselves that if we don’t reply to that message within 10 minutes, our company or family or church will crumble.

Jesus says, come away, rest a while. You’re a big deal, but not The Big Deal.

Jesus and the disciples aren’t away long when people come seeking them.

After teaching until it was growing late, the disciples are ready to send the people away to give them time to buy something to eat in local villages.

Jesus responds in emphatically, “You give them something to eat.”

The disciples quickly become like Presbyterian Elders, crunching numbers and finding that it would likely require an impromptu capital campaign to raise the funds to feed all of these people. Before he allows them to form a committee and design a logo for brochures, Jesus springs into action.

He has them gather up what they can, five loaves of bread and two fishes.

The language is similar to that used in the Last Supper, with Jesus not blessing as a way of showcasing his power, but of gratitude to God. The Greek words eulogeo and eucharisteo are freely used for blessing or giving thanks, not Jesus zapping them with his power.

According to biblical scholar Eugene Boring, the five loaves of bread likely represent the scrolls of the Torah or Jewish law, referred to as bread in the book of Proverbs (9:5). The twelve baskets of leftover bread could symbolize the tribes of Israel, left to point to the presence of Jesus beyond his death. (Keep in mind that these stories were told for decades after the first Easter, with the book of Mark likely written around 70 years after the fact)

We can also find significance in Jesus’ noticing that they were like sheep without a shepherd and having them sit in on the green grass as they ate until they were filled. While eating until we are full and taking home a doggy bag is common for many of us, eating until one was full was a rare occurrence in the context of the Bible. This isn’t just any meal, but a foretaste of a vision of God’s Kingdom—people on green grass, in a land of plenty, with the Divine Shepherd guiding them.
Will we write off this story and others like it as some interesting literature and wishful thinking buy people who didn’t understand food distribution? Will we be open to the blessing of discomfort that Jesus could be saying the same thing to us that he did to the disciples—*you* feed them!

What is God saying to you in this story?

I must admit that I can feel overwhelmed when I read and listen to the news about the current state of our state and the world. Some of the antidotes to despair I have are our young people. Our middle school team served in Los Angeles week before last and the high school group just returned from Chicago last night. While it is true that we have plenty of need right here in the Bay Area, one of the purposes of a mission trip is to do the same thing Jesus called his disciples to—step away and gain perspective.

Calvary young people listened to stories of individuals without homes and to others with dementia and Alzheimer’s, cooked meals, cleaned parks, made hundreds of beds in a massive shelter, and even prepared used bicycles for low income residents and others in need around the globe. We also learned about institutionalized racism involving housing and food justice. Our young people represented Christ and Calvary with intellect, joy, and plenty of elbow grease.

Today it is my honor to represent two of them to you, Quentin “Q” Bone from the middle school team, and Amelia Gale, going into her senior year at University High School.