



World Development Appeal 2016



Theological reflections

They were standing by the shrimp pond, with their visitors from Ireland. “We always leave some shrimp in the pond when we’re harvesting,” the EL Zompopero shrimp farmers said. “So that anyone who is hungry can take what has been left behind.”

Their words echo, to our ears, the drumbeat of love’s commandment, expressed in so many ways and so concretely, in the teaching of the Old Testament.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.”
(Lev 19.9)

There will always be a need to express our love for our neighbour in concrete acts of justice, in daily practices which provide for the poor and the alien and the suddenly bereft on a structured and dignified basis.

Undergirding those daily, disciplined practices, however, is the ongoing making right, the continuous recalibration, of all economic structures that tend over time to injustice. This, too, is a discipline which God has commanded in the marking of the years of sabbath and jubilee (see Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15), to the end that all might know the sustainable dignity of a workable livelihood, in a community which will always have a place for them.

And so Maria Juana Argueta Vigil, a member of the board of the El Zompopero Cooperative Society says this: *“We are working for one single cause – economic development and wellbeing for every single one of us.”*

On a sunny Sunday morning, earlier this summer, a small Presbyterian congregation in San Salvador gathered for worship. The gospel reading for the day was John 6.1-15: a story of milling crowds, anxious disciples, a boy with five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus serving as a waiter, and, in the end, twelve baskets of broken bread.

The crowds, we are told, were seated on the grass, and all were served as much bread and fish as they wanted. The image is one of an open hillside table, set with all the easy grace of a spontaneous welcome; it is an image of surprising plenty, as each cluster of people in this random crowd finds in turn that there is more than enough to go around; it is an image of thanksgiving, of *eucharist*, for what is unexpectedly received.

And yet the initial echo of anxiety haunts the story, and resonates each time we hear, yet again, its familiar words. Like the disciples, we remain anxious that we do not, after all, have enough for the circumstances, and that what is required is beyond us. Or as the preacher said on that sunny morning in San Salvador: *"We say to ourselves that we only have five barley loaves and two fish. And of what use can so little possibly be?"* Because the need in front of us is enormous.

The clue, however, lies in the story. For in the end what is left over are twelve baskets of *broken* bread. It is not the unbroken loaves, taken aside and counted, which nourish us or give life to others. It is the *breaking* of the loaves, and the sharing of them, which gives life.

Jesus, knowing this, takes the loaves that are there, gives thanks, and hands them round. And as they are broken and shared from his hand, then, and only then, do they become enough, and more than enough. Then, and only then, does the grassy hillside become a banquet table., and the baskets fill with fragments.

In Jiquilisco Bay, in the company of the shrimp farmers who started with practically nothing, but started, the baskets are already visible, if you look closely. The first signs of a just economic order for all, starting with pools full of shrimp. A merciful community, replanting mangrove forests that will one day shelter their lives and their livelihood, and slowly leaching the poison of past conflict out of the soil. A resilient people, not giving up on their responsibility for one another, yet now living for a future that they know will not be theirs to see.

So perhaps now it is our turn. To bring not just our own unbroken loaves to the table, an acceptable offering. But to bring our very lives, lives that are whole like a loaf, known, and counted on, and then to offer them also for breaking, not as hearts are broken, but as bread is broken, and shared. To offer them to the work of building a more just economic order, a more merciful community, and a more grateful and resilient church, whose shape we cannot yet see.

And then, finally, to understand that it is not the loaves which count any more, but the fragments, the life-giving, plentiful fragments, piled up in baskets all around us.