
How Many Loaves?

Rachael Weasley

I love today's passage, Mark 6:30–44. It's a story that appears six times in the four Gospels, a story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. This version of the story is about intense work bookended by times of rest. Jesus ushers the disciples away to rest, but he also challenges them to ministry they think impossible—providing dinner to the crowd. And the trick of it is, the disciples didn't bring the dinner. The crowd did. Tonight in particular, on this momentous second gathering of our church for a congregational meeting, I'm finding I can relate most to the disciples' experience of surprise. Surprise at what Jesus asks them to do. Surprise at what is possible. Surprise at where the meal comes from. "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asks. "Go and see."

When I sent in my seminary application, I had zero intention of planting a church. If anything, I was against it. It sounds hard. Like the disciples, I assumed the only solution was to send the people away so they could buy themselves dinner. But here we are, at the gathering that will include our second annual congregational meeting! I didn't expect to meet any of you, but here we are sharing Zoom communion and eating our fill! Folks from all over the country and even Canada. Queer folks and parents of queer folks and non-queer folks alike, here at this virtual table to share what we have. I fully trust the abundance I've come to expect from this community.

Some of you were at our first worship two and a half years ago, or made it to the first congregational meeting last summer; but lots of you are new to the church since then, so I wanted to do some storytelling tonight as we reflect on the short and busy little history of this church! To start off, I'm going to back way up.

Rachael Weasley (she/her) grew up United Methodist in California and studied music at Oberlin College. During her time at Chicago Theological Seminary she began writing contemplative music with gender-inclusive language in the style of Taizé, and joined a Mennonite church. (Find her songs on OneLicense or at <https://rachaelweasley.bandcamp.com>.) After several years doing preschool teaching, community organizing, and music ministry, she shifted into church planting in 2020. She is currently the pastor and church planter at Community of Hope Mennonite Church (Bellingham, WA), an online and in-person community that centers queer theology, Just Peacemaking, and family of choice. She and her partner, child, and cat live in Bellingham.

I graduated from seminary ten years ago, intending to do music ministry and ritual design. My partner and I followed the mysterious call of the Spirit and relocated from Chicago to Bellingham, Washington, in 2015. I got a barista job and a music ministry gig and looked unsuccessfully for a new church home. I found several options that were large, formal, liberal churches, and only one of them had congregational polity. One was cozy and liberal, but the tradition was too clerical. Not my cup of tea. I was looking for a more medium-size church, no clergy robes, walks in the Pride parade, and friendly to visitors. I was looking for a church that did potlucks. I wasn't the only person I knew who had stopped going to church when they moved to Bellingham. I wasn't even the only *seminary-trained* queer person who failed to find a church home in Bellingham. That's when all kinds of random people, who didn't know each other, all started asking me, "Have you ever thought about planting a church?"

I brushed off the first two or three people. But when more and more people, who had never met one another, kept asking me, "Have you ever thought about planting a church?" I decided I should start praying about it. "*How many loaves do you have?*" *Jesus asks. "Go and see."* In 2017 the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference gave me a few hundred dollars to attend a church-planting conference and buy a few books. I started interviewing people who had planted churches. I finished writing my second album. I got pregnant and gave birth. I came out publicly as queer. Then the pandemic hit.

In the summer of 2020, amid the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, I was on the phone with a young activist friend who was feeling disillusioned. Our conversation convicted me that the church I would plant must offer hope, and community, to young activists like him who struggle with the sustainability of justice work. Over the phone he asked if I would plant the church online during the pandemic. I told him it was impossible. But I couldn't shake his question. Are you going to plant the church online during the pandemic? "*How many loaves do you have? Go and see.*"

I was never alone in the church planting. At each step there were angels and partners. But, as I waited for a community to coalesce, I made a lot of decisions without your input. I named the church—Community of Hope. When the money ran out, I paid for the Zoom account myself. I claimed our domain name and started emailing people from the address "pastor@communityofhopechurch.com" before I was really anyone's pastor.

Four months after I declared it impossible, we held our first event online. That was back in fall 2020, and the event was hosted by Hold the Line. It was an online training about how grassroots citizens could prevent a coup and ensure a fair and nonviolent transfer of power after the presidential election. Two people attended. One left because we are too Christian. The other left because we are too Queer.

The next event was our first Blue Christmas service, also over Zoom. And that's when Debbie Bledsoe found me online.

Debbie was the first person who said, I think this church is a good idea and I will help you do it. Suddenly I had a teammate. She recruited half the people to our next event, a 4-week queer theology book group in spring 2021. We read *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* by the Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey.¹ Because Debbie and the people she recruited were students at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana, suddenly our church was half local, half diaspora. As it turns out, not everyone has access to an in-person Mennonite church that centers queer experience and queer theology. As we heard how important it was for folks to be able to access a space like that over Zoom, our vision shifted to include a commitment to continuing online after the pandemic.

By then I had run out of the money from the conference, so I was working for the church for free, doing my barista job for the cash, and footing all the church-related bills. My mentor suggested I apply for the Thrive Grant, but that required me to be in process for ordination, which required that *my congregation* write a letter to the conference. But who even counted as the congregation? In an act of bravery and vulnerability, I asked two members of the book study if they would sign a letter that I wrote requesting my ordination. Rachel Joy, bless her, replied right away. She said yes, and would you like to meet regularly throughout the process? So our leadership team was born: me, Debbie, and Rachel Joy. Now Zoom was not only because of Covid—it was because the three of us all lived in different states! The first decision the team made was to start worshiping regularly, and this is our two-year anniversary—the 25th of those first-Monday gatherings!

We got the Thrive Grant, but the check was made out to the church, and we didn't have a bank account! So for a while it was just a piece of paper while we set everything up. We drafted bylaws in case the bank required them. We evaluated our worship flow and made changes. We strategized and planned and reflected and dreamed together in those meetings. At first the three of us showed up at every event, a community-building core group to welcome newcomers.

Nonprofit status required officers, so Rachel Joy agreed to be treasurer and set up a spreadsheet to keep financial records. Debbie agreed to be administrator; she took minutes during meetings and organized a shared Google Drive with document templates and a flow for our leadership team agendas. Things were getting expensive, so Rachel Joy looked into it and figured out how I could legally receive free-will offerings directly into my Venmo, to help with expenses. That fall, 2021, we met our first financial goal of breaking even. I was still donating my time, but the church—the church! which now existed!—was paying its own

¹ Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

way. We opened a bank account and deposited the Thrive Grant. It was a gray, drizzly day, and as I drove away from the bank, a rainbow appeared in the sky.

My vision was that we would be a community that showed up at picket lines and protests, that threw its weight behind affordable housing initiatives and racial justice work. A community that cared about one another outside of worship, a place to make friendships and find chosen family. When I was sorting through my own identity, I heard queer people preach from the pulpit, but I didn't hear them talk about queerness. I didn't know how to pray through my own journey. I needed help seeing how God fit into my journey, how God could accompany me. "Inclusive churches" hadn't provided me the spiritual tools I needed for my personal journey around queerness, so I was passionate that we resource queer spirituality and make sure we were proactive about exploring queer theology. To have a place where the debate is over and affirmation is baseline seemed obvious, but people kept making it a big deal. I thought, let's have the full belovedness of queer and trans folk be the jumping off point, and see where we go from there! Let's do constructive theology through our liturgy and worship arts! This quickly became our front-running issue. I don't know why this still surprises me. I look forward to the day when this is normal and a low bar for any church.

Rachel Joy moved to Holden Village that winter and resigned as treasurer. Glory joined the leadership team, and Brad Brookins agreed to come on board in spring 2022 as the new treasurer. He's the one who created line items so that we could start tracking expenses by category.

Last summer was our first congregational meeting. People joined the church officially for the first time. The power of that moment caught me off guard. Like the disciples, I didn't see my dinner coming from the crowd. But suddenly, here it was: a few loaves and fish. And that was plenty. A dozen people signed their names to say that the church meant something to them. That they wanted to be part of it. That they would support it to continue. These first members finally formally approved the bylaws and passed the budget. And the budget included fair wages to be paid to me for my time. In two short years I had gone from paying church expenses out of pocket to receiving a salary affirmed by consensus!

I thought we would be a local church that met over Zoom while in-person wasn't possible. And sure enough, now that the pandemic has eased we have grown a local in-person group that started gathering monthly for Wild Church last October. However, the majority of our leadership and members are scattered far and wide—in California, Wisconsin, Kansas, New York. Tonight we have arrived here as a community of folks in four time zones and two countries! We are way more diaspora, Christian, and Mennonite than I thought we'd be when I set out to make a home for unchurched feminist hippies in my Pacific Northwest town. Like the disciples, I never expected this. Maybe you didn't either. We are people who've been burned by church before but still believe in the beauty of church. People who have been kicked out, pushed out, whose children or theologies were

not welcome at our former churches. Hopeful that church still has bread to give us, we show up here tonight looking to one another for the dinner we need.

As we continue to grow into a community that claims and governs itself, I celebrate my own divesting of power and our communal vesting of power. We were once a church run by me alone with my laptop. Now we are about to use consensus to choose our own leadership and a cooperatively designed budget—*for the second time!*—carrying on a proud, hundreds-of-years-old tradition of Anabaptists who value the power of the local community, collective discernment, and non-hierarchical polity. For those of us in Bellingham, we are filling that gap of being a small intimate community that is also Anabaptist and congregationally governed. And sure enough, we do potlucks—after Wild Church in person each month, but once or twice we’ve done them over Zoom as well!

The more we become organized as a network and less as a wheel with myself at the center, the more set up we’ll be for complex ministry in the future. This coming year we’re finally ready to put some infrastructure into place, such as a safe church policy to protect the children who aren’t here yet, a covenant of understanding for your pastor, and formal supports for small groups.

A congregational meeting means that, even though I’m the founder and church planter, everyone here shares in the responsibility of power and decision-making in the life of our church.

Today we heard a story of Jesus feeding a crowd with food that a few members of the crowd had brought with them. They had brought only a little, but after Jesus blessed their food, there was more than enough for everyone. We’re about to spend some time looking at an image of abundance and reflecting on the ways we visualize God. I encourage you to look to this community; the food you need is already here. We gather to share with one another what we have, whether that’s kindness or time, a potluck dish, or a financial offering.

Perhaps the most important thing we offer to one another is the strength to continue believing in the reality of hope, despite all the hardship we experience. The audaciousness to look for bread where we don’t think there is any. We gather to trust that what we share together is more than enough, if we allow Divine Mystery to guide and bless the feast. Amen.