

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

October 4, 2026

There's a story out of Zimbabwe that begins with a family and five goats. Not five goats they bought because they had plenty of money. Five goats that came into their lives at a time when the family was struggling with poverty and food insecurity.

The family is the Mafutas. Before they received those goats, they didn't have livestock of their own. They didn't have enough food. Their children suffered from poor nutrition and illness. Then Heifer International offered them not only five goats, but also training on how to raise them and on household finances.

Five goats became twenty-one.

Now, if you have ever been around goats, you may be thinking that this sounds less like a miracle and more like what happens when you leave goats unsupervised for five minutes, and you're right. The miracle is what happened next. The Mafutas did not keep all twenty-one. They gave five goats to their neighbors.

That was part of the agreement with Heifer International. When a family receives an animal, they don't simply receive a gift. They receive an opportunity. They receive training and resources, and when that animal produces offspring, the family passes on some of what they have received to another family. This passing on the gift is baked into the Heifer model. The Mafutas passed on five goats. Eventually, the family that had once owned no livestock had goats, cows and chickens. They were growing crops, selling milk and eggs and animals, and sending their children to school.

The part of the story that interests me most is not the number of goats. It's that the story began with a gift, and then the gift kept moving. That is a pretty good place for us to begin this morning, because today we are celebrating two things that, at first glance, might not seem to have much to do with each other. We are celebrating World Communion Sunday, when Christians around the world gather around tables that look different, in languages that sound different, with traditions and theologies that are sometimes very different, and yet we celebrate that we are still part of one body. And we are celebrating our annual Heifer International Living Gift Market, when we put our money together to purchase animals and other resources for people around the world who are working to build lives of greater security and abundance, with the goal of donating an "ark," or \$5,000.

One celebration is, ostensibly, about bread and wine and the other is about goats and chickens and water buffalo. But I think they are both telling us the same thing: The gifts of God are not meant to stop with us. That is what our passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah is talking about. The Prophet begins by telling us about people who are doing all the things religious people are supposed to do. They are fasting. They are praying. They are seeking God. And they want to know why God does not seem to notice. God's answer is essentially: because you have misunderstood what I am looking for. You think being faithful is about what happens inside your worship service. You think faithfulness is about whether you have performed the right rituals. But God says: "This is the fast that I choose." Loosen the bonds of injustice. Let the oppressed go free. Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless poor into your house. When you see someone naked, cover them. Do not hide yourself from your own kin.

In other words, God is not particularly impressed by our ability to look religious while ignoring the people around us who are hurting. God is interested in what happens when our worship leaves the building. God is interested in whether the bread gets shared. God is interested in whether people who have been pushed to the margins are welcomed back to the table. That is why I love it when we hold our living gift market on World Communion Sunday. Because Communion is not simply about remembering something Jesus did a long time ago. It is a declaration about the kind of world we believe God is creating.

There is enough bread.
There is enough grace.
There is enough mercy.
There is enough love.

The question is not whether there is enough. The question is whether we are willing to share what we have. That brings us to Jesus. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is watching people at a banquet. He notices people jockeying for the best seats. He notices the social calculations that happen whenever human beings gather around a table: Who belongs here? Who matters? Who is worth knowing? Who can get me invited to the next party? Jesus watches all of this and tells them that they have misunderstood the whole point of the banquet. Do not take the place of honor. When you throw a banquet, don't invite only the people who can invite you back. Invite the people who cannot repay you. Invite the poor. Invite the people who have been left out.

Jesus is not giving us etiquette advice. He is describing the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a table where the usual calculations are suspended. It is a table where you do not have to prove your worth before you sit down. It is a table where generosity is not a transaction. And that may be one of the most radical things Jesus teaches us. We live in a world that teaches us to think in terms of transactions. What do I get for what I give? What is in it for me? Will this investment pay off? Will this person return the favor?

Jesus offers us another way. Give without keeping score. Share without calculating the return. Make room for people who cannot repay you. Pass the gift along. That is exactly what I love about Heifer International's model. The goal is not simply to give someone an animal. The goal is to help create a future in which that family has something to give. The gift is not supposed to end with the first recipient. It keeps moving. A goat becomes another goat. Training becomes knowledge. Knowledge becomes confidence. Confidence becomes economic stability. Stability becomes the ability to educate children, care for a family, strengthen a community, build the reign of God. One gift becomes another gift becomes another gift. That is an abundance economy. Not the kind of abundance our culture usually talks about. We tend to think abundance means having more than we need, but Jesus seems to imagine something different. Abundance is having enough to share. Abundance is discovering that what we have becomes more valuable when it moves beyond us. Abundance is not a bigger pile. Abundance is a wider circle.

That's also what we mean when we gather around this table on World Communion Sunday. The Christian church is not one congregation. It is not one denomination, one language or one country. Indeed, even though I am particularly devoted to our Open Table Fellowship, we celebrate today that Jesus' followers have a breadth of theologies. The Christian church is this strange, complicated, beautiful family that stretches across the world.

Somewhere this morning, Christians are breaking bread in places where there is plenty. Somewhere else, Christians are breaking bread in places where there is not enough. Somewhere, Communion will be celebrated with elaborate music and beautiful vestments. Somewhere else, it will happen with almost nothing. Yet somehow we claim that all of those tables belong to the same, universal, eternal table. That's not because we all agree. It's because Christ keeps setting the table anyway.

So today, when you look at those animals outside and think about what you might choose to sponsor at the Living Gift Market, I hope you will see more than a goat. I hope you see a gift that might become another gift, a family whose future might become part of another family's future, abundance not as something we accumulate, but as something we circulate. And when we come to this table in a few moments, remember that this is what Jesus is doing, too. He is not asking us to prove that we are worthy of the feast. He is simply setting the table.

There is bread.
There is wine.
There is grace.
There is room.
There is enough.

So come to the table. Receive what has been given. Then carry the gift with you when you leave. Because the miracle is not that God gives us everything we need. The miracle is what happens when we refuse to keep the gifts of God to ourselves.

The bread gets broken. The cup gets shared. The gift gets passed on. And somehow, impossibly, beautifully, there is enough.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Isaiah 58:6-12; Luke 14:7-14
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