



The Holy Act of SERVING BREAD



DENISE JOHNSON shares her story about a day at a feeding station in Addis Ababa.

“For I was hungry and you gave me food....”

How many times over the course of my life have I heard that verse from Matthew 25? Too many to count. How many times have I responded to that verse? An annual trip to the soup kitchen? An occasional check to Covenant World Relief?

Just as often, we’ve heard the question from the disciples, “Exactly when, Jesus, were you hungry?” And Jesus responds, “When you fed the least of these, you fed me.”

As a participant in my church’s mission trip to Ethiopia last fall, I had the privilege of helping serve several meals at a feeding station in Addis Ababa run by Hope Enterprises, an organization that seeks to “provide hope for the needy in Ethiopia through holistic human development.”

Since the 1970s when an American missionary opened his home to three street children, Hope’s mission has expanded to twenty projects located in five of Ethiopia’s nine states, focusing on rescue, rehabilitation, and development.

The station we visited serves lunch daily for 750 to 1,000 people. Feeding that many people in a confined space might have been a chaotic operation. But it was just the opposite.

When we arrived we were greeted by a man in a gray suit with one leg and a crutch. We entered the building, locked up our gear, and went back outside where the man led us around the corner to an alley. Seated along both sides of the alley were dozens of people waiting for an entry ticket. It was a biblical scene, like the crowd waiting beyond the city gates to catch a glimpse of Jesus and a chance to



Ethiopian bread, injera, is folded on soup bowls to be distributed.

touch the hem of his garment when he came by.

Our task was to distribute tickets we had purchased to those who were waiting. Tourists are encouraged to buy books of meal tickets and distribute them, rather than money, to those on the street. The cost is about four

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cents per meal. Our stash of tickets quickly disappeared into the hands of the waiting crowd. There were many more hands than tickets.

Feeling somewhat overcome by our inability to fill all those hands, we reluctantly walked back to the building to help with the meal preparation. Several women on staff at Hope had already prepared the *injera*, the local bread, which was piled high, ready to be folded. The bread gave off a strong aroma, especially for those of us with already queasy stomachs. At one point the *injera* was stacked so high that it began sliding off the table onto the floor. It was quickly scooped up and placed back on the pile, nothing wasted.

The accompanying bean soup had been prepared offsite, and several other workers brought it around in

rummage sale. If only I had known, I could have slipped one into my suitcase. It would have been a small gift, but I wished I had one to offer.

As the people started arriving, they descended single file down a concrete path under an overhang of gauzy material, perhaps a shelter from the midday sun or from rain during the rainy season. Because they walked down an incline, by the time they reached the window to collect their food, we were several feet above them and eye contact was difficult. They were coming in such a steady stream there wasn't time for conversation even if we had spoken the language. They had already exchanged their meal ticket for a token, and as they handed over the token, they each received the bread and a bowl for soup.

was asking for two bowls, sometimes I would see a person leading another who was blind, or a mother with a small child, or a child helping an older person. Sometimes only a hand would reach up and place a token on the counter and I had to peer down to find either a very young child, barely tall enough to reach the counter, or an adult with no legs, or with legs they couldn't use, moving across the ground on hands and knees.

Everyone came quietly, orderly, and respectfully. Some of the older people bowed when they took the bowl, and several actually kissed the food. One time I heard a very clear “Thank you,” and I looked up, startled, to see a young boy, probably about ten or eleven, walking away. I wondered how he came to learn English, and realized there was a story behind that



After people with tickets ate, their leftovers were emptied into a bucket to be offered to those without tickets.

large tubs to be transferred into buckets and dished out.

When all was ready, the workers sat down to a meal or a snack, we weren't sure which, consisting of a medium-sized roll and tea set out on a jagged-looking platter. They offered us some, but the portions were meager and we didn't want to take anything away from them. I was thinking about the many cast-off platters we try to unload every April at our church

I developed a rhythm of taking the token in one hand and passing out the bread and bowl with the other, all the while repeating to myself, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was hungry and you gave me food.” Occasionally the pattern was interrupted when a hand reached up with two tokens, and I had to break my rhythm to make sure I gave out the proper amount.

When I glanced down to see who

boy that I would never know.

After receiving the food, the people proceeded to cement tables and benches set close together under a cement canopy that was painted a bright high-gloss white. On their way to the tables, many stopped to wash their hands and face in an outside washtub.

Seated together with their bread and bowls, they waited for the soup. My teammate Britta worked her

magic. Moving easily between the tightly packed tables, she carefully portioned out two ladles of soup to each recipient with a smiling face and attempts to speak a few words in the native language.

When the first group finished scooping up their soup with the bread, they deposited their bowls back on the counter, and we emptied the remains—if there were any—in a large blue bucket. The bowls were swished through some tepid water that had bits of food floating in it, then rinsed under a faucet, tapped on the counter to dry, and ready to be used by the next group. (I think they changed the water only once.)

In between groups we folded more injera and stacked up the bowls. The scenario was repeated three times. Collect the tokens, hand out the injera and bowls, ladle up the soup, collect any remains, swish the bowls clean, fold the remaining injera, stack up the bowls, and get ready for the next group. Each group comprised about 250 people with the leftovers going to the last group.

And by leftovers, I don't mean food that was not given out. When everyone with a token had been fed, the food that had been collected from their plates and dumped into the blue bucket was scooped out into large bowls—like plastic chip and dip bowls—and soup was ladled over it. These platters were placed on the tables for those without tickets. The whole operation ran smoothly and orderly. There was an economy of movement and an economy of resources. Not a scrap of food remained, and it was incredible to consider how many had been fed.

Seeing people very like the ones Jesus might have encountered as he walked the dusty roads of Galilee was a deeply moving experience. We talk about how Jesus has blessed us, and we talk about how much he loves us, and these things are true. But these, too, were his people. For my teammates and me that day, Jesus, who was hungry, moved among us, and we gave him food. ■