

Bread in Abundance

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 6:1-13

OK. So, we're not a crowd of 5000 this evening – but we are a crowd. And in a number of ways, that fact helps bring us right into the story this evening. First of all, we too are a crowd of people who have intentionally drawn near to Jesus. Most of us know something of Jesus and what we know and what we've heard, what we've experienced, has us wanting more. It has us wanting to learn more, to see more, to hear more, to understand more. Secondly, there's no getting around the fact that we too, if not already, will soon be hungry. I don't know if you're an eat-before-the-evening-service person, or an eat-after one but either way, in not very long, you will feel the need to eat again. We come to this place with real human needs. Hunger is one of them. But there are many. Also, all of us come here tonight with a particular view of the world and of its resources and of how needs get met and of how it all works or doesn't in this world we live in. Here's one pervasive mindset about how the world works. All the resources of the world are like a pie. There are only so many pieces of the pie you can cut away before the pie is gone. You can have a few large pieces or many smaller pieces or a combination of the two. But when the pie is gone, the pie is gone. There is a limited quantity of what's available in this world to meet everyone's needs, thus to grab what you can, when you can, and hold on tight – seems to be the most prudent way to live.

Well, as we just read, Jesus and his disciples are dealing with their own situation of limited resources. They've got this massive crowd on their hands, who've been wanting to get closer to Jesus and naturally, eventually it becomes not just a curious crowd but a hungry crowd. And one of the most powerful lessons of this passage is that Jesus notices. He notices their hunger. He's concerned about their need. Jesus is bothered by the physical and even mundane needs of human bodies. It's good to be reminded of this. Why? Because there's so much that reminds us daily that our bodies are needy. They are frail and fragile and dependent on things outside of them. I get that this realization may be much more acute for those of us who are older, but that truth shakes the young sometimes as well.

This past week after having lunch with my daughter at Gita Pita, there on the corner of Fulton and Jefferson, we stepped onto the sidewalk and immediately heard the familiar high-pitched squeal of tires followed by the slamming crunch of metal as two vehicles collided in the intersection. From where we were standing we could easily see one of the drivers, who said he was Ok, but was completely stunned and a bit ashen. The other driver was OK too. But on our walk back to church, my daughter (who's a nurse) and I talked about how vulnerable our bodies are to injury and illness, to pain and sufferings big and small. Jesus knows this about us too.

So, after Jesus prompts Philip with the question of where they might buy enough bread to feed all those hungry people, Philip responds very practically with a good pragmatic answer. Philip sees the situation and says, "We don't have the resources to deal with this." And to give Philip a little break here, practically speaking, he was right. What he said was true. There was not nearly enough money in the disciples' budget to do what Jesus was asking them to do. Now Andrew saw things a little differently, at least. Because of the generosity of a young boy, there were maybe a few pennies in the discretionary fund. But Andrew too, had to acknowledge the insufficiency of these assets. Meager really. Pathetic is more like it, especially when you

consider that barley was the poor person's grain and the Greek word used here for small fish is perhaps better translated teeny tiny fish. This offering was a laughable pittance, we might say.

But here's what Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." And echoing Psalm 23, John says, on plenty of green grass, "they sat down." And then Jesus gave thanks and handed out the food and, amazingly, all the people ate. They ate not just a little nibble or snack, they ate all they wanted. They ate until they were full, until they were satisfied, until they had enough. Now, I do always wonder when I read this story - where the multiplication actually takes place? Was it in the baskets? In the people's hands? Before their eyes? But to dwell there misses the point. Because, you see, what we have in this story, is actually an answer to one of life's biggest questions. Is our world one of scarce resources or abundant? Are our available resources limited to what we can see in front of us, or is there more to the story?

Well, I wish I had time to recount tonight, the many ways Scripture answers that question. Someone once pointed out to me that so often in the Bible; right in the middle of fairly sensible narratives, suddenly there's an absurd and irrational and mysterious abundance. Where things have been barren or lacking or hollow, where there has been need, suddenly there is miraculous prolific food – bread raining from heaven, birds flying in to deliver meat and nourishment, a jar of oil that refuses to stop filling, fish and loaves that multiply. The bottom line is without the intervention of God, we in ourselves, do not have what it takes to meet all our own needs, or the needs of this world. We are not smart enough, strong enough, wise enough, willing enough, powerful enough, creative enough, or compassionate enough. We, in ourselves, do not have enough. But, here's the good news: we have Jesus. And when something that is scarce is placed in the hands of Jesus, who is God, scarcity becomes a vehicle for abundance.

Friends the disciples saw only the little they had to work with instead of paying attention to the One who was in their midst. At the end of human knowledge, at the end of our worry over how meager our resources, how weak our condition, how messed up our situation or that of the world - stands Jesus. And Jesus' message to us is not only that he is concerned for the needs of our physical body, and the bodies of all people, as wonderful and comforting as that is. But also in feeding those hungry people Jesus was pointing to the abundance of the invisible kingdom of God that had broken into their visible world. Jesus was offering not only sustenance for our bodies but also for our souls. Jesus, in multiplying and sharing that meal was saying: I am the way, the truth and the life, and in the hands of God your life and this world holds abundant and eternal possibilities.

So friends, here is what I believe Jesus is asking of us tonight. Do we truly trust that in God's hands, our released lives, our resources, our bread, even our scarcity and frailty – can become a channel of abundant life for us and others? Remember what can happen in God's hands. In God's hands order comes out of chaos. Water is turned into the finest wine. And a teeny tiny lunch is made into a feast for thousands. And most amazingly, in God's hands, the iron grip of death gives way to resurrection and eternal life.

John Buchanan, editor of the Christian Century, shared this story, attributed to the Christian educator Parker Palmer, calling it the best commentary he ever heard on the feeding of the 5,000. The story takes place in the days when there were no security screens at airports and you could carry pretty much whatever you wanted in your briefcase or purse. As Palmer's flight from O'Hare to Denver pulled away from the gate, it taxied for a long way then stopped. The pilot eventually came on the intercom with the bad news that the Denver airport was socked in with snow and had shut down. "We are going to be stuck here for a while," As you can imagine, everyone groaned and the grumbling grew as time went on. After a while a flight attendant took

the mike, “We’re really sorry, folks. We didn’t plan it this way, and we can’t do anything about it. We know that some of you are hungry. Some of you have a medical condition and really need to eat. So I have an idea. We have a couple of empty bread baskets up here, and we’re going to pass them around. Everybody put something in the basket. I know some of you have brought a little snack along, just in case: peanut butter crackers, candy bars. Some of you have Roloids, Life Savers, or chewing gum. And if you don’t have anything edible, you have a business card or a bookmark. The thing is, I hope, everybody puts something in. And then we will reverse the process. We’ll pick up the baskets at the back of the plane and pass them around again and everybody can take out what he or she needs.” “Well,” Palmer said, “what happened next was amazing. First, the complaining and griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags and briefcases. Some stood up and retrieved luggage from the overhead racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, Italian sausage, cheese, crackers, and a bottle of wine. Now people were laughing and talking. The flight attendant helped to transform a group of anxious people focused on their need, deprivation, and scarcity into a gracious community, sharing and in the process creating an abundance of sorts.” The flight eventually took off and landed, and as he stepped off the plane, Palmer found the flight attendant and said, “You know there’s a story in the Bible about what you did.” “I know.” She said. “It was my inspiration.”

In the hands of God, the gifts of our lives, our resources, our intellect, our experiences, our bread can and do multiply and become an avenue of abundant life for our neighbors in this world. We, in ourselves, do not have enough but we have Jesus. And Jesus shares with us the bread of life and, by his Spirit, moves us toward others with bread, and with kindness and compassion and good news. So friends, come to the feast of heaven and earth, come and eat without money and without cost. And then go out and share the bread of life with others and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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