

John 6:1-15^{New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)}

Feeding the Five Thousand

6 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.^[a] ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages^[b] would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they^[c] sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

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John 6:1-15

Communion: Our Daily Bread

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There's a prayer in our funeral liturgy that begins like this: *O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking. Show us now your grace, that as we face the mystery of death we may see the light of eternity.* It's one of my go-to prayers. Weird as it seems, I often approach prayer with a "God, I don't really know what I'm doing yet" attitude. I like to think that prayer is a lot more about showing up than it is about sounding eloquent before the God of the universe, at least I hope so, because the author of sunsets and spring flowers probably isn't so interested in my deep thoughts or sentence structure.

Let's face it. Our prayers are ignorant – *not in the rude kind of way* – but in the unknowing kind of way. We pray foolishly, thinking that God might not know what we need when God knows our true needs better than we can articulate or even feel within ourselves. The same holds even when we pray the Lord's Prayer. We pray those petitions actively and willingly, but do we know what it is we're praying for?

The example I have for that this morning is the bread line from that prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread." The prayer for physical sustenance, the prayer to have enough of whatever it is we need for today, and the prayer for our spiritual hunger to be satisfied – these are all great prayers. Bread can represent several of our deeply human needs. And we will explore multiple layers of meaning attributed to bread over the next four Sundays as we work through the sixth

chapter of John's gospel. You see, John is particularly taken with this metaphor. He portrays Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, but his teaching is often steeped in the language of symbol. Jesus talks more often, with greater nuance, and in longer soliloquies in John's gospel than in the other three accounts that are more focused on his actions and events.

Nevertheless, John begins this chapter though with a story, a story familiar to all the gospel accounts, Jesus multiplying a few loaves and a couple fish to feed a large crowd of people. This story happened, for real, I'm sure of it, and it doesn't really matter if you believe the miracle had to do with a supernatural replication or a sharing that was drawn out by Jesus' compassion. Either way, I think we're looking at a miracle here, that stunning surprise when God reaches out into our world and shows us how different it 'could' be. Of course in John's gospel, it makes sense to look at the way the story unfolds to see how he interprets it to be such an integral part of Jesus' message.

This time in reading through the story, I couldn't help but imagine that Jesus' message was meant as a commentary on the "daily bread" prayer. First, he asks a question to "test" Philip. "Where will we buy bread for all these people to eat?" And the answer is perfectly and stupidly clear. There isn't enough. There isn't enough at the corner convenience store, or at all the bread stands within walking distance. We haven't planned for this. There won't be enough to go around. And for that matter – it's not exactly free! Are you kidding Jesus? Philip's response is certainly an interesting rebuttal. After a brief moment for calculation, he says, "Six months wages wouldn't be enough to feed them all." He must have been the financial advisor for the group, right? My Wells Fargo guy always cautions me that you need at least six months of living expenses put aside in the bank to feel secure in an insecure economy. That's what daily bread really costs: reserves, savings, making sure that you have enough, not just for today, but for any

unforeseeable emergency that could happen tomorrow. So Jesus asks again, what DO we have? It turns out they have a boy's donated lunch – a meager offering. Five loaves, two fish, and a prayer! Starting there can't possibly provide enough, not enough for today, not enough for this crowd, not enough to feed those for whom this will be the only meal they eat until the next paycheck comes along. It's a ridiculous answer, but Jesus is willing to work with it.

He sat everyone down in the grass, blessed what little they had and started feeding people. He fed, and fed, and fed until everyone had had plenty, and then he asked his disciples to collect the leftovers. Can you believe that, there were leftovers? They filled 12 baskets with what was left. It's an amazing story. The manna in the wilderness didn't have leftovers. These hungry townspeople weren't used to over-abundance, and even in this nation of absolutely everything, neither are we. We live in the imagined scarcity of the advertisers. We are encouraged to be kept in a state of constant hunger, never satisfied. You can't ever have enough. As I heard Glennon Melton Doyle say in her talk at the Meadowdale Library Friday night, "You can never have enough of the things you don't really need." Markets know how to create need. We need a new car, or the latest fashion, or a gourmet dinner. We need to look good, smell good, and have more than the next person. But it's not the truth. We can be satisfied. In this story, Jesus shows us that God wants to satisfy our needs, the real ones, not the keep up with the Jones' ones. We know that it doesn't "always" happen that way. Internationally, perhaps there should be enough – enough food, enough shelter, enough compassion to make a difference, and yet there are hungry people right next door, and children dying for food in other parts of the world. And still, being thankful and sharing, and sitting down together creates the opportunity to realize that we do have all we need.

As a kid, I distinctly remember eating at my Aunt Ruth's when we went to visit. She and my Uncle Fred lived in a trailer, on a mountaintop in West Virginia, with Tinkerbelle and a bunch of Tinkerbelle's kittens. They didn't have much. The cupboards were pretty bare. But the plaque hanging over the two old chairs in the kitchen was their standard mealtime prayer: "God is great and God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hand we all our fed, give us Lord our daily bread." They truly believed that's where their food came from, I'm sure of it. When we ate there, it always felt like it was a feast. She made coconut cream pie for my Dad. I can taste the jars of homemade pickles, the yellow plums from their tree, and the various other snacks and sandwiches she would offer. She showed us love with what she had. She wanted us to eat until we were stuffed. I graciously obliged. So did my Dad. Her pies were delicious. It was country food. And there was always something left. I don't know how.

We've probably all had a similar experience somewhere along the way. In an instant where it looks like there can't possibly be enough, a surprising feast emerges, abundance happens. That's a sign of our common union, our unity and communion as human beings. We are taught by the world to believe that we always have to save, and scramble, and climb over top of other people to survive, but we don't. We can share. We can bless one another. What looks like it will require six months wages might only take the price of a lunch for two. As I've learned from many theologians and preachers that I admire, God is far more willing that we are to work with nothing. As Nadia Bolz-Weber says, maybe it's God's favorite medium. The universe explodes out of nothingness, a nothing little tribe in the Mediterranean is chosen to be God's example, a barren womb is filled by Jesus... you begin to get the point this story is trying to make. We pray for what we need – not for forever – but for today. Enough for today, and we shall be blessed, maybe even blessed in such a way that we are inspired to do something about

all our leftovers. May the telling of this miracle work its magic in you – this day – and always.

Amen.