

“Loaves and Fishes”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
July 8, 2018
Scripture: John 6:1-15 and Psalm 14

We are heading into the realm of miracles that stretch the limits of what is expected and possible. The story of a meal that was told and retold around campfires for decades before being set down in writing. In the gospel of John, things like this are called signs – signs meant to point to the true identity of Jesus not as some extraordinary human but as the Son of God.

In this story are multiple miracles, packed into one story. But before we launch in, think about a line we will say together this morning. “Give us this day our daily bread.” We say it every time we utter that most familiar of prayers, the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven,” and in the next sentence, following in the example Jesus taught us, we are asking that God “give us this day our daily bread.” In that prayer, if we paid attention, we might train our appetites to the concept of enough. Daily bread. We’re not praying for feasts on a daily basis, but enough bread to make it through the day with strength for our bodies. And that might be a reminder that often, many of us, have access to so much more than our daily bread. That we hunger for nothing. While others are literally dying of hunger.

The 14th Psalm we heard this morning is somber and full of pain. The Psalmist stands looking at the world as she or he saw it, and saw might making right and the meek being trampled. And the Psalmist saw the evil ways of evildoers and trembled. Didn't they learn the right values? Didn't they learn about telling the truth and being kind and that greed is not good? Don't they know that God is on the side of the righteous?

The Psalm sets up our gospel story this morning. It is a cry that any of us could offer up, having listened to the news of the day.

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the LORD?

There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.

You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge (Psalm 14:4-6).

“Give us this day our daily bread,” we ask in prayer, and we know that too many have that same prayer go unanswered. And so when we ask that, we know also that if we can we could and should be the answer to other peoples’ prayers for daily bread.

Back to our Gospel story today, back to a miracle that nearly crowned Jesus king. A story that begins with lots of people gathered tightly around Jesus. A huge crowd. It is called

the feeding of the five thousand, but that heading should only be used with a spoiler alert. It is a story that appears in very similar fashion in all of the gospels. Which is rare, I should add. In each telling of the story, a great crowd has gathered to listen to Jesus teach. Five thousand men, and Matthew adds, five thousand men besides women and children. And it is late. And there are no food trucks.

Jesus realizes it is late, the people must be hungry, and they are too far from home to eat dinner later. All the gospels tell of just five loaves and two fish. But John has an additional detail that I find very intriguing. Only John tells about the source of the loaves and fish.

Jesus asked one of the disciples, Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6:5). And here, the gospel tantalizes us with an aside from the narrator. “Jesus said this to test him, knowing what he would do” (6:6). And you heard what happened next. A boy was identified who had five loaves of bread and two fish.

And the child volunteered to share what he had brought. Usually it is not up to a child to do the packing for a long day-trip, is it? If a child had thought ahead to bring food, perhaps others did as well. That’s my sense, at least. The gospel is silent about that. But if a little boy had thought ahead and packed bread and fish, perhaps others in the crowd had packed some food as well. And when they saw the generosity of the boy, combined with the teaching and actions of Jesus, they decided that they could bring their food out of hiding as well and offer it up to be shared.

That would be miracle enough for me. Shifting from a mindset in which each person or family will sit quietly and try to sneak bites of food in their mouth, hoarding what they have, in which one act of generosity sparks the generosity of others and suddenly the whole crowd is fed.

Jesus had asked one of the disciples “where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? knowing full well what he intended to do. Jesus knows that there is enough in the world. Heaven knows there is enough – enough wealth, enough care, enough love, enough food – the problem is getting the generosity started. And sometimes it takes a child to lead the generosity.

It is interesting what Jesus does not do in this story. He doesn't profit from the sudden supply of food. He blesses it, breaks it, and shares it with all those who are gathered -- and they want to make him king. And he declines. And that in itself might be another miracle.

So what does this story say to us today. You might say, “It’s a big, mean cruel world out there” – fine, I say. And not really any different than when Jesus walked this earth. You say you’re just one person – and even together, what are we – a hundred today? And ask what can one or one hundred and one people do to make a difference in a world peopled by billions? You say look at all the money that billionaires can pour into trying to solve problems like climate change, or you can look at all the money billionaires can pour into financing candidates and attack ads and influencing tax policy and you might think – what can we of much more limited means do to impact public policy? I get that feeling, I really do.

But do you know who we start to sound like when we make these very real excuses? We sound like one of the grown-up disciples in this story. We sound like Philip, who looked around and saw only the problem and not the solution that was so close at hand. “Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little!” (6:7). Or we sound like Andrew, scoffing at the small gift that has been sighted. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” (6:9).

Jesus once said – and we can read it in the Bible, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). We’ve got to enter the kingdom like a little child. With, I guess, imaginations open to new possibilities. With curiosity and a concern for others. With the intensity of a four year old working on a puzzle – thinking that there must be a solution.

Billie Holiday sang this and the US Army Corps of Engineers in World War II took it as their motto. “The difficult I’ll do right now. The impossible will take a little while.” Here are my loaves of bread, here are a couple of fish. Let’s see if these can help.

If you want to do something great – don’t sit paralyzed, waiting for the perfect moment. Do something significant and generous – even today. The kingdom of heaven is like that – five loaves and two fish get shared among a crowd of five thousand people – and suddenly, instead of scarcity, there is enough. Stunningly so. So much that baskets of leftovers are collected at the end. But it starts with someone sharing. And whereas before, when people were worried about scarcity, there is suddenly an abundance.

The gospels, the church, a caring community – they all help us to imagine a world of abundance. That among us when we gather there is enough. Enough concern, enough food, enough love.

We do meals really well here at Central. Great loaves of bread. The occasional fish. Barb's salmon bisque is amazing. And Barb and Sue and the team of volunteers can make food stretch, and they can repurpose leftovers. The quality of the meals are amazing, and our Wednesday lunches have been written up by food critics for the City Pages and Pioneer Press.

But it goes beyond the quality and quantity and variety of food served here. Deep friendships are formed and sustained at our meals, around the tables and in the kitchen.

Yesterday we celebrated the life of Mary Price. She died back in May at a vigorous ninety years of age. Still active, opinionated, vibrant, she was a regular in the kitchen crew all the way to the end. So yesterday, at her memorial service, it was something to see so many kitchen volunteers, gathered in the sanctuary. Instead of rushing around to chop and carry food and wash dishes - they sat down to smile at stories and shed some tears and remember and give thanks to God for a friend they had met during the breaking of the bread.

The meals here at Central are part of how we try to live out the Gospel. Quality food, served in an affordable manner, designed to bring people together. Our motto from the beginning is that everyone who is hungry can eat here (regardless of ability to pay). Our meals,

much like that meal on the lawn during the Feeding of the Five Thousand facilitate the sharing not just of food but of our humanity.

We were given a gift and a challenge. Could we do more to springboard from our strength to do more to help people who are hungry? We have been doing research, looking at the nature of hunger near us and learning about good organizations working to address the problem. Learning about food shelves and free meals and innovative programs. On Friday night, we sent out a small crew of volunteers to help cook and serve dinner at a church as part of the Loaves and Fishes program. I love how that story is being brought to life in churches around the country and around the twin cities. That is faith being put into action.

And that is one of the models we are looking at for how we could expand our ability to help people who are hungry eat. We will have more chances to explore other models, including this Saturday at Higher Ground shelter, and in worship next Sunday.

Let me leave you with this image. Of a crowd of people gathered, and the adults fretting, when out of the blue a little boy offers up his loaves and fishes. And that launches a chain of miracles of generosity and abundance.

So do something this week – big or small – that is generous and unexpected. Keep your eyes and ears open to surprising goodness. And keep your hearts open to the love of God, that gets in under your skin and works on you little by little, shaping and reshaping us for the kingdom of heaven. May it be so. Amen.