

Gospel - John 6: 1-21

Pentecost 9

Sermon 7.25.21

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I mentioned as we opened the service that our Gospel reading in John continues the story from last Sunday's reading in Mark. Today Jesus feeds 5,000 men; he also walks on water.

In the story of the miraculous feeding what if women and children were included in the count? How many people might there be?

Drawing on the work of sociologists, Megan McKenna suggests the ratio of women and children to adult men would be 5 to 1 or 6 to 1; so the size of the entire crowd could have been as many as 35,000. That is a lot of people to feed. When Philip answers Jesus that six months' wages would not be enough money to buy bread for everyone, his math works out to about 50¢ per person per lunch.

Jesus knew what he was going to do, and each individual ended up having more than enough to eat; so much that after every-one had had their fill and could eat no more, the disciples collected up twelve bushel baskets of leftovers.

In the Bible whenever we read such words as, "My grace is sufficient for thee," we are apt to think of sufficient as meaning God gives no more grace than what we barely need to get by. Truth be told, a single tablespoon of grace is incalculable, immeasurable and vast as eternity itself.

So Jesus asks his disciple Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" **"He said this to test him."** Does Philip understand what Jesus is up to; does he get it? That is his test.

All of the apostles are once again put to the same test when Jesus walks on the water. They toil and struggle against wind and waves on the lake and no doubt ask themselves if God's grace is really going to be sufficient for their survival. Christ physically demonstrates to them transcendent abundance of God's resources for every need, even if it means they all get to walk with him above the storm safely to the other side.

What actually happens in the story is at the very moment "they wanted to take him into the boat, immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going."

The account of Mark says they did not pass the test. It says, "The wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

This points to the same message we have been learning for the past few Sundays: Whenever we happen to believe we have barely enough or less than enough, God proves repeatedly we have fully enough and more than enough. We have at least twelve overflowing bushel baskets of "more than enough."

This is hard for us to wrap our minds around, especially when we feel like we lack the needed resources or that we struggle and toil against life's rising winds and beating waves.

Zero sum thinking is a particularly insidious visceral idea. It teaches us our resources are finite and limited and meant to be hoarded. It says I have only enough for me alone. If I share my resources with you, or if you happen to take them from me, then you have gained, but I have lost. You can see how zero sum thinking flies in the face of generosity with abandon.

Resource generosity is the common theme of all our morning readings. The prophet Elisha commands his servant to feed a hundred people with “twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.” The servant protests but obeys, and they all “ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.”

The psalmist sings that “The eyes of all wait upon you, O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the needs of every living creature.”

The writer to the Ephesians prays for all of us, no matter who we are or what our race, in order to “have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth” of all God’s love and riches in glory.

Also today’s Gospel begins the first of five upcoming readings about Christ our bread of life, our all sufficient provision.

“The story of Jesus feeding the multitudes is told six times in the four Gospels. John’s account, which fills chapter 6, was probably written about 100 CE, and the attention the fourth evangelist gives to the story probably reflects the church’s growing sense of the importance of the weekly assembly meal.

“In John the loaves are barley, which was the bread of the poor, as well as being the bread in the Elisha story.

“By setting the event near the Passover, when the Messiah was expected to appear, John uses the story to proclaim Jesus’ messianic identity. . . .”

Five thousand men are mentioned, because men are of the privileged status and class. All of the unmentioned, the women and children, are thus commonly marginalized and objectified, having no such privilege. But they do make up the largest component of the crowd by that 5 to 1 or 6 to 1 ratio.

As well the one person singled out for the means of supplying food, a little boy, he too falls well below dignity either of status or class.

I appreciate Jesus does not do any vetting in this story. There’s no passing any litmus test of personal worthiness. There’s no separation made on the basis of age or gender or anything else. Jesus doesn’t check if there any gentile families in the crowd.

The only qualification is hunger. In the account in Mark 8 Jesus says, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.”

Just like the little boy, we each have rich treasures in potential available to share, we don't know what or how. We may think we have only a little, a meager amount, a morsel of forgiveness here, a small bite of love there, not much more than five barley loaves and two small fish.

Then God puts us to the test. Will we dare to believe that we have enough for whatever it takes? Will we share without thought of needing to hoard? Jesus promises that "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away (Matthew 25:29).

Even when we think that we have little to give, whenever we do freely give out of our supposed lack, God more than proves with multiplication that our finite capacity actually contains his infinite possibilities. And when we think we have nothing, God still uses our little willingness to share whatever we could have in possibility.

Therefore lift up to God even your little willingness and say a prayer of thanksgiving. God will use your little willingness, distribute and multiply it and have it be of help to others in a miraculous way. John writes, "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."

Only after the prayer of thanks did everyone have both enough and more than enough.

Have you noticed that the practice of thanksgiving and gratitude expands our ability to believe for good things, for good outcomes?

We live in a land of super-abundance, but we focus our minds instead on limitation and lack, on problems and shortcomings and on scarcity and fearful self-protection and self-preservation. We center on scarcity far more than abundance, when in reality scarcity is only a tiny negative imagination that's trying to attack the absolute certainty of abundance. Giving thanks expands the capability of our minds and hearts to envision God's abundance in reality.

The Greek word for thanksgiving is *eu-charisteo*—"Eucharist." At its center is the root word *charis*—"grace." This is why even in our English language, when we say at the beginning of a meal, "Let us say grace," at the same time we're saying, "Let us give thanks."

In just a little while we will be praying together the Eucharistic prayer of the liturgy. It is called "The Great Thanksgiving." It begins with the words,

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It continues in the older rite, "Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name, evermore praising thee, and saying,

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts:
“Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
“Glory be to thee, O Lord most high.
“Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.
“Hosanna in the highest.”

The entire prayer, ending with the Great Amen or Three-Part Amen, constitutes our table blessing, our saying grace, before we eat the Lord’s Supper.

We say grace—we give thanks—and afterward we eat. The elements in form are like a very small portion, a morsel of bread, a sip of wine, but there is enough for everyone to enjoy and be filled. We ought to go home from the Lord’s Table patting our spiritual stomachs and saying, “I’m stuffed!” As it says in today’s gospel, they all ate “as much as they wanted.”

Jesus puts Philip to the test: “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” In other accounts the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away for dinner, but instead he commands, “You give them something to eat.”

Jesus knows we have the capacity. Jesus knows we have the potential. Jesus knows we have enough for whatever it takes. But we need to know it. We need to know what Jesus knows. We need to know it for ourselves. We need to know it for our neighbors. No one gets left out. No one goes hungry. Not you. Not the person beside you. There is grace enough for all. Amen.