

Until All Are Fed

John 6:1-13

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After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When 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?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

Then 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. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

John 6:1-13 NRSV

I completely understand Philip's response in this week's story of the feeding of the crowd of more than 5000. It is a mountain of hunger standing before him, after all. And it's not as though any one of Jesus' close followers had with them the resources to begin to touch that unending need.

Although I have not stood in front of 5000 people who are hungry, I see and read about the mountain of hunger every day. Every Tuesday night people who are unhoused in Marin come to our church and are fed through The Street Chaplaincy. I wonder about those who don't come. Every week people go to the Ritter Center to receive food and help with housing and other social services, including the week before Thanksgiving. On any given week, the Deacons have supplied the church office with Safeway gift cards so that when someone in need comes to the church during the week in need of food, we can offer them a card. And in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Yemen, Syria and many communities in the United States.

As a church, we are committed to feeding people. And yet, I find I still feel an awful lot like Philip pointing out the obvious truth to Jesus that it takes a whole lot to make a difference to such a mountain of need. There are times and situations that leave me feeling a little hopeless.

As though nothing I can offer will ever be enough and that even what I have to give won't start to satiate the profound needs of people in this world. Not even when they show up one at a time. I know something of the despair which fed Philip's response in the story before us now.

And so we look again to Jesus. And I realize that he looked beyond Philip's entirely reasonable response. What Jesus saw was a hungry crowd and that in the face of such need even reasonable despair is simply not an option. And when he was told that there was a boy there with a lunch of 5 loaves bread and 2 fish, he took that and began to share it. We know the rest of the story. We don't know how it happened. But we do know no one went away hungry that day.

It surely would have made more sense to tell those people they were on their own for their next meal. This crowd of 5,000 would be hungry again before they knew it. A miraculous meal on a hillside wouldn't change that. And that only spoke to their physical hunger.

And yet there is this:

- We are not told what became of those 5,000 + who feasted on a boy's lunch that day so long ago?
- We don't know how many of them left that day with a greater sense of possibility and hope than they had ever had before.
- We don't know if in the next meals they shared, whether they experienced a deepened sense of wonder at what can happen in such ordinary moments. And we don't know whether as they learned to watch for it, they were able to continue to experience the presence and work of God in remarkable ways.

We don't know, for the story doesn't tell us. We DO know, however, that this story is told in one form or another in all four Gospels, so it must have been life changing for many. And so we DO know that this truth that Jesus met people where they were and gave them what they needed in that moment is central to our understanding of who Jesus was and is and therefore, is also central to who you and I are called to be as we seek to follow his ways.

It doesn't seem like much:

- Five barley loaves and a couple of fish
- A large bag of food with Thanksgiving meal staples and dessert
- A handful of gift cards to Safeway
- Serving a meal in Canoles Hall and sitting with people who are unhoused and struggling

It doesn't seem like much, but in the end, it may be everything. We may never know. But the fact that you and I often don't know what comes next, doesn't mean it didn't make a difference. And just that possibility can turn despair into hope again.

Who do you relate to in this story?

- One of the people in the crowd who is hungry? Maybe there has been a time in your life you did not have enough food or enough money to buy food.
- A person in the crowd who felt hungry for something more than food?
- Philip? How will we feed all these people? We don't have enough.
- Andrew? Practical? Noticing someone is sharing what they have. It is not enough.
- The boy? Wanting to share what we have in love? Being a person of compassion even when people assume he cannot make a difference?
- Someone in the crowd? Wondering what is next? Being hungry? Having a hungry heart?

Have you felt Philip's despair when he looks at reality and scarce resources? What did you do then? What are we called to do?

How can we feed a crowd with two fish and five loaves? And in the world's scarcity mindset, donations of food and hosting weekly meals won't make a real difference. It's almost mocking the seriousness of the situation to even suggest it.

Then 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. Who is this one who embodies divine love and compassion? This one comes from a different mindset, a different vision, a completely different reality— a way of living and being where gifts are multiplied.

This one was and is operating with different rules altogether, where people – in their most insignificant offering of hope or help, of sharing what they have - do make a difference. Where lives are changed on small choices. And where all people are connected. Where miracles happen and we're part of them, and most of the time we don't even realize it because they are ordinary, which is also another way to say, so extremely prevalent. This one is a God of abundance and not scarcity.

Are we open to being changed? To growing as people of compassion? Of experiencing God's deep love, living into this vision that changes us and then responding in gratitude?

Today and throughout the year we as a church are seeking to follow this one. This Jesus who taught with words and actions of love & fed people. This one who said, "I am the bread of life."

Many of you brought cans or boxes of food over the past few weeks. Some of you donated money. Maybe you think – It is just a few cans. It is not enough. But the miracle is sitting on the tables behind you. And our sharing combined with others will bring food and hope and encouragement to our neighbors this Thanksgiving.

You are a part of more miracles than you will ever know. Let's live that way. Amen.