

The Bread of Life

Isaiah 55:1-6; John 6:1-14

July 25, 2021

Every time I hear the story of the feeding of the five thousand, I am reminded of reading about a man packing a shipment of food for the poor people of Appalachia, not too far from where I grew up. He was separating beans from powdered milk, and canned vegetables from canned meats. These were all donations from a school in the Midwest. Reaching into a box filled with various cans, he pulled out a little brown paper bag. Apparently one of the pupils had brought something different from the items on the suggested list. Out of the paper bag fell a peanut butter sandwich, an apple, and a cookie. Crayoned in large letters was a little girl's name, "Christy -- Room 104." She had given up her lunch for some hungry person. Christy sounds like a special little girl. I suspect that young boy who offered the five loaves and two fish was a thoughtful youngster too... willing to give up his lunch as he did.

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The miracle of feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels (see Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, and John 6:1-14). That tells us how much the early church thought of this story. John mentions the time of year. He tells us that the time of Passover was near, suggesting that Jesus will deliver God's people from bondage and provide bread or "manna" for their needs, just as Moses had done in the OT.

Today's story follows the brutal beheading of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod. Jesus has retreated in an effort to deal with the grief and loss, and to have some time alone. But now thousands of people discovered where Jesus was staying, and followed his every step. They were hungry and hurting, but rather than rebuff their needs, Jesus "had compassion for them and cured their sick." (v. 14)

As the day wore on, they grew hungry, though the disciples begged Jesus to send them away. (v. 15) Jesus said to the disciples, "They don't need to go away. *You* give them something to eat." (v. 16) But the disciples acted helpless, and so Jesus took control of the situation, and asked what provisions were at hand.

He wanted to test them, and ask them to solve the problem. That's where we find ourselves in the context of today's miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Now note that the number 5,000 was derived by only counting the men! The numbers of women and children were not officially counted, so there were many more.

How many would have been there that day? Seven thousand? Ten thousand?

We don't know how many people were there, but we do know that it would have been a huge crowd-- far more than the disciples could have fed with five loaves and two fish. One thing is for sure: God's provisions and resources are always bigger than our own. God's dreams are always bigger than our own. It was at that point that Andrew walked up. He looked around, and said: "There's this boy with barley loaves and a couple of fish." Jesus said, "Bring them to me."

An interesting side note is that the loaves were made of barley flour. It was the flour that poor folks used for their loaves, not what the rich folks used. It was common bread for common folks. In any case, the little boy is the real hero in today's story.

When Jesus learned about the food, he called the boy. The boy couldn't believe his ears. So the boy trusted Jesus where the disciples could not, and gave him the five loaves and two fish. We all know what happened next. The people were fed with plenty to spare.

Today's gospel suggests that one person can make a difference. Or rather, two people can make a difference: one person working along with Jesus. The boy gave what he had to Jesus, and it was enough to feed a hungry crowd. Just think of it. Had the boy said "No" to Jesus, the crowd may have gone unfed, and the Gospel would be without one of its' most inspirational stories.

God has set up the world in such a way that the action of every individual is important— even a little boy. The meager resources of one little boy were able to feed over 5,000 because he trusted Jesus. After the boy gave Jesus his lunch, he asked all the people to sit down. He blessed the food and then gave the five loaves back to the disciples, and the disciples gave the bread to the people. They kept giving, and giving, and giving. There was no end to the bread. All the people ate and were filled. When the disciples gathered up the broken pieces of bread, twelve baskets were filled with what remained. It was a miracle!

What becomes clear is that Jesus is the one who can end real hunger—hunger of every sort, not just the kind that makes our stomachs growl an hour before dinner. Later on, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never hunger."

We worship a God of abundance. As God says through the prophet Malachi, "See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." (Mal. 3:11) God's real purpose is to provide food that lasts, food that keeps us truly alive, food that doesn't just feed us one moment, only to leave us hungry the next.

Make no mistake. God's people are a hungry people. They show their hunger in so many ways. Especially we UCC folks! Seems like we're always eating! We have missed those potlucks during the shutdown!

What are you hungry for today? You might remember a popular song many years ago by Bruce Springstein:

Everybody's got a hungry heart,
 Everybody's got a hungry heart,
 Lay down your money and you play your part,
 Everybody's got a hungry, hungry heart.

Yes, God's people are a hungry people, but Jesus is the bread of life. He said, "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

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So what if you could have been there among the 5,000? What would you have experienced? Would you have seen only physical hunger satisfied, or something more? I do know this. I know Jesus still touches lives today in miraculous ways; Jesus still transforms people's lives. People are fed, and in ways that go beyond physical hunger.

Why is it that some people see it, and others do not? We just like the disciples are tempted to believe that we don't have enough. Jesus proves otherwise. Jesus provides REAL food – SPIRITUAL FOOD - not fast food. The message of today's gospel is that one caring person can be the instrument for helping hundreds and maybe even thousands.

I was thinking lately of Mary Kay Sweeney who gave a presentation here last week. Her ministry is amazing, and is an example of the effect one person and one organization can have. Besides giving a person a loaf of bread and putting food on the table, giving them a roof over their head and a warm bed is a miracle in itself. They go hand-in-hand.

Today's gospel tells us that if we offer our talents and gifts to Jesus, he can perform miracles with us and through us. Just like the little boy, we can work with Jesus to perform miracles for a hungry and hurting world.

As many of you know, I grew up in a bakery. My parents were bakers, and I got to help bake the bread whenever I was around. There is nothing like fresh, warm baked bread right out of the oven. My folks knew how multiply loaves -- 30 –40 –

or 50 loaves of bread every day, and then there were the rolls and the buns. But this was no ordinary bread. This was bread that often found its way free of charge to the people in that small West Virginia town who couldn't always afford to put food on the table.

My folks were generous. There were days they gave away more than they sold. Nothing ever went to waste, and there was enough for many people to be fed. My grandmother often came down to the bakery, and she used to say to me, "You are what you eat! You are what you eat!" I guess she thought I would turn into a loaf of bread, and she was probably right! It was also a statement that had profound spiritual implications, though she probably didn't mean it that way.

What if we were to say that the bread we eat is the body of Christ? What if we were to say that the body that is broken is the body of Christ broken for us? What if that bread fed more than our bodies, but our very spirits and the essence of who we are? What if that bread was broken around the same table with our Lord?

Everyone is looking for bread, and not just any bread, but the Bread of Life. The Bread of Life. The bread that endures is Jesus himself.

He is the bread that is broken, and distributed for the life of the world.

He is the bread that is broken, and yet never divided.

He is the bread that is eaten, and never runs out.

He is the bread that consecrates those who believe in and eat from his table.

When we believe in Jesus and eat the bread of life, we live differently. We see ourselves and one another as persons created in the image and likeness of God, rather than as obstacles or issues to be overcome. We trust the silence of prayer rather than the words of argument. We choose love and forgiveness rather than anger and retribution. We relate with intimacy and vulnerability rather than superficiality and defensiveness. We listen for God's voice rather than our own. Ultimately, we seek life rather than death. "I am the bread of life," Jesus tells the people. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

He is offering the people himself. He is the bread that nourishes and sustains life everlasting. Jesus makes us the same offer. He offers himself to us in every one of our relationships: family, friends, strangers, enemies, those who agree with us, and those who disagree. In every situation and each day of our life, we choose the bread we will eat, whether it is the bread of bitterness, or bread that will last. In doing so, we choose the life we want to live. So I wonder, what kind of bread will you eat today? Amen

Isaiah 55:1-6

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
 and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
 and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
 because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found,
 call upon him while he is near.

John 6:1-14

1 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias),

2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.

3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

4 The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up,

9 "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.

11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted."

13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

14 After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."