

Gaining Abundance
July 26, 2009
John 6:1-21 NRSV

¹Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ²and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

⁵When 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?" ⁶He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

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

⁸Another 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?"

¹⁰Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹Jesus 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.

¹²When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴After 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." ¹⁵Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. ¹⁸A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted.

Thanks be to God.

While Jesus' heart is touched by the hunger of the crowd, John is teaching us about the power of God in Jesus, about who Jesus is. Of course, we learn who Jesus is by what he does, which is true of most everyone we encounter today; wouldn't you agree that actions speak even louder than words? When John writes of Jesus' ministry, he is sure to relate the powerful teachings of Jesus with action. The words Jesus said connect often with stories about what Jesus did. So here we read about the disciples, down-to-earth and overwhelmed by the crowd, computing the cost of feeding so many people. "Impossible," they say; immediately heading towards failing another test from their teacher. We know, however, that all things are possible with God, so this story is just as much, if not more, about the power of God in Jesus as it is about Jesus' compassion for the hungry crowd.

What can we get out of the miracle worker; a perpetual free lunch? Does it sound familiar? 'What's in it for me?' It is the kind of thinking that skews the reality of grace and seeks to make of Jesus a genie or an errand boy to satisfy our human wants." Instead, Cousar writes, Jesus is "more than the promised prophet, and certainly not a wonder-worker who lets himself be captured by the crowd to supply their wishes." Recall that John writes in verse 15, "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." Can we see beyond our immediate wants and expectations? How else will we begin to see where God is leading us?

In telling these stories, both the story of the feeding of the crowd and the walking on water, John recalls more than the text from Deuteronomy. That is, the longing of the people for freedom from the empire that oppresses them, leads them, alas, to set their sights too short. It's understandable, only human, that they would see in Jesus a potential king and certainly a miracle-worker. Like their ancestors before them, they hold onto the promise of Deuteronomy 18:15, the promise of a prophet like Moses who will be raised up by God to lead them. Is it any wonder then that they see a good candidate for king in this man of power?

John P. Burgess explains: "These two stories are more than journalistic accounts for the morning newspaper; they are rich theological constructions that draw on larger biblical themes." Feeding the hungry masses and

calming the troubled waters sound familiar, don't they? Didn't Moses face a similar problem in the wilderness, asking "Where am I to get meat to give to all these people?" (Num. 11:13). These are Exodus memories, memories of liberation and freedom, memories of promise and new life. Someone bringing barley loaves that are inexplicably multiplied and shared would have also reminded the people of the story of Elisha in 2 Kings 2:42-44. Burgess observes that "Jesus feeds the five thousand up on a 'mountain' (v. 3), just as Isaiah once prophesied that 'on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples/ a feast of rich food'" (25:6). In Jesus God is providing the Bread of Life, manna from heaven, and even delivering us from the waters that would engulf us.

The disciples of Jesus were overwhelmed by the need before them. If they didn't feel a responsibility to meet that need, Jesus certainly raised their consciousness. They tried to assess the situation, measure their resources, and figure out a solution, but they seemed to feel powerless in the face of so many hungry people. Johns simply suggests, that God responds to our prayers for the world's needs with the question, "What do you have?"

Many of us come from various spiritual backgrounds and traditions. Some of us were raised Pentecostal, others Lutheran, Presybeterian or Episcopalian, others may have been raised in one of the varying degrees of the Baptist Faith. It's possible that some here today were raised Catholic,

Methodist or maybe you were not raised with any faith tradition at all. Regardless of our backgrounds, I would venture to say that many of us are here today for 1 of 2 reasons: We either (1) have found ourselves looking for a Community of Faith that will offer us some hope of acceptance and relationship; or (2) we have been looking for a place to serve God more closely and intimately; a place where we can give of our time and talents. Either way, New Day has been planted in Toccoa, Georgia not by a few men and women who have decided to play church, but by God in order to provide a sanctuary of fellowship, prayer, worship and encouragement; a place where we can feel safe to serve. A home away from home, if you will, where people, all people, can come and find a reconciled, renewed relationship with their Creator, their Redeemer and their Sustainer; their God.

Growing up, I remember that there was not much consistency in the way of denominational faith traditions. That is, I remember attending the Baptist Church as a child and then the Congregational Holiness Church as a teenager. Two very different denominations in their understanding of theology and doctrine, however, they were very much the same in their liturgical practices. Neither the Baptist nor C.H. Churches of my experience preached the lectionary; meaning that each week's sermon theme was not scripted, but rather found its way into the pulpit as a means to promote controversy, instill fear and shame, or to rekindle the readings from the

front page news rather than promoting God's will and purpose for our lives. As a result, life in the church for me had no edge, no elegance and no joy. It was only a bitter series of experiences that centered around the old adage, "There's a Heaven to gain and a Hell to shun."

I often felt there had to be more to Christianity than the ten "thou shall nots" of the Old Testament and the additional eight or nine "thou shall nots" that were recited when convenient. You know them, those that are read from the book of "hesitations." Those passages pulled out of context and used to instill fear, shame and disillusion into young hearts and minds with the intent of directing them, "onto a path to righteousness and away from a road to self destruction." Thou Shall Not Have Tattoos; Thou Shall Not Listen to Secular Music; Thou Shall Not Date Interracially; A Man Shall Not Lie with another Man or a Woman with another Woman; all the while confusing cultural tradition with immoral behavior. These experiences of early religion held no attraction for me, but I was bound to it by the guilt and fear it instilled within me. Most assuredly, this is also true of others here today.

I had all but reached the bottom of the proverbial barrel when everything began to change. In flipping through the pages of an old bible, I ran across a highlighted passage in John's gospel, Chapter 10 Verse 10. It read, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." In that instance I began to understand that Christ calls us to a life of fullness,

affirmation and joy. In that moment the Word reached out and claimed me. There is hope and encouragement in the teaching of Jesus Christ. There is a hope for renewed relationship and reconciliation. Christ came that we may have life and have it abundantly. He, as we recall each Sunday during our time of Communion, to deliver a New Covenant, a New Hope for a New Day and A New Beginning for each of us.

Each of the four gospels is different in the view of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Recall that Mark was in a hurry to breeze through the life and ministry bit and was anxious to tell of the Passion of Christ, that is His death and resurrection. Mark accomplished this by transitioning between many accounts using the word "immediately," so as to speed things along. John's gospel doesn't have quite the sense of urgency that Mark's does, however, as with all the gospels, it does have a theme. John gospel speaks to a theme of abundance.

So here amongst the scripture reading today, we find that a crowd of people has followed Jesus to the lakeshore. Their attraction to him is so strong that in their excitement they forget to pack a lunch. Jesus leans over to Philip and says, "Philip, how are we going to buy enough food to feed these people?" It was another test. Philip, who represents the church, replies the way the church often replies to a crisis: "We're done for. Half a year's wages wouldn't be enough to feed all these people." And then, as Philip continues to mumble, his colleague Andrew informs Jesus that a boy in

the crowd is carrying a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. “. . . but how far”, Andrew continues, “will they go among so many?”

In researching the theme of abundance in John’s gospel, I ran across the following Celtic prayer by David Adam. It reads:

*Be gentle when you touch bread
Let it not lie uncared for--unwanted
So often bread is taken for granted
There is so much beauty in bread
Beauty of sun and soil, beauty of honest toil
Winds and rain have caressed it,
Christ often blessed it
Be gentle when you touch bread.*

In our scripture reading today, Andrew says, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves."

"Make the people sit down," replies the Lord. The meal is blessed, served, then eaten, and--when all are satisfied--there is enough left over to fill 12 baskets. That is abundance!

Abundance is a theme throughout the fourth Gospel. In the first chapter John speaks about Jesus as the word from whose fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Consider the first sign, when water is turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus instructs the servants to fill some jars with water, and they fill them to the brim. The result is a profession, not merely of wine, but of good wine. Then, at a community well in Samaria, Jesus tells a woman about living water gushing up to eternal life; once more, a note of abundance. In the beautiful departure speech in the 14th chapter of John, we hear, "In my Father's house there are many

dwelling places," and at the end of the Gospel, John brings his witness to a close by noting that in addition to the things he has told us, there is much more to be told, so much so that if it were all reduced to writing, there wouldn't be enough space in the world to contain the number of books that would be required. (Charles Hoffman).

Whether it is wine at a wedding or rooms for eternity or picnic food, there is always more than enough. So it must also be for us today in our lives and in all that we encounter through our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Recall that before I mentioned an account of my own early impressions of the church. For me, these impressions are now a thing of the past, but for many in our culture today it is still very much a reality. It is in fact one reason for the lack of growth in many churches today. Many congregations today have forgotten why church is all about. It isn't about building funds, church chairs, choir music or ice cream socials. All of these are important aspects to the church as an *organization*, but there is more to fostering a church into a living, breathing, growing and nurturing *organism*. It is as the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (nee cha) once said, "Christians will have to look more redeemed if people are to believe in their Redeemer." It is a simple truth that people are drawn to that which nourishes and enriches their lives.

Many of us have faith that mirrors that of Philip and Andrew. They had difficulty seeing beyond the six months wages or the meager five loaves

and two fish. We tend to base our living on our own scarcity or even on our own fears of insufficiency. Not only do we fear our own insufficiencies when it comes to material contribution, but also when it comes to our time, our talents, our gifts and our call. So we hoard and save and worry and end up living life in small and safe measures. We pull back when we should push forward. We, like Moses, say, "No, not I Lord, you must mean someone else." We give into our fear of a shortfall rather than exercising faith in God's abundance. As disciples and apostles of Christ, Christians are constantly on call to go places where we have never been, to do things that we have never attempted and to be things we have never envisioned.

Through us, God has planted an International Christian Community Church in Toccoa, Georgia. What began with a faithful few in just a few short weeks has doubled and tripled in size. We must continue to exercise our faith in all that we do and in wherever we go. Reach out, take a chance and get involved. Invite a friend to church; tell someone you meet about New Day. More importantly, tell as many people as you can about the love of Jesus Christ and all that He has done for you. Tell people about a relationship Jesus Christ. Tell people there is a hope for reconciliation with their Creator. They don't have to be a part of the GLBT community to be a part of this faith community. To come to know Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, there are no preconceived notions or entrance requirements other than the one we hear about each Sunday as we prepare remember

Jesus as we partake of the symbols of His body and blood. To come to know Christ as your personal Lord and Savior only requires that you come to Him with an open and repentant heart; one that acknowledges the sacrifice that he made for you, for me and for all who will know Him.

John 6 invites us to live into a grace-filled inheritance, a timely calling because most of us tend to live on the edges of what God has to offer. We are challenged to take seriously God's generous offer of life not, of course, so that we might end up being wealthy in this world, but so that we will position ourselves for the adventure of faith that enriches and enlivens those who embrace its challenge. Amen!