John 6:1-21

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. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The story of the Loaves and Fishes is perhaps one of the most well-known in all the Bible. It is told, in slightly different versions, in all four of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—which lets us know that it was known and beloved widely across the early church. It was thought to echo the Exodus story of God providing manna in the wilderness to the Israelites. It was a story told each time communion was shared.

And from this we know that the early church trusted the way this story communicates the essence of the gospel message, the core values at the heart of our faith—values about generosity, compassion, sharing, abundance, stewardship, trust, and love. All that in one seemingly simple, straightforward story about how the sharing of a little becomes enough for all.

This is a story about Jesus that becomes a parable. It’s as if the Gospel writer starts the story by saying “the kingdom of heaven is like that time when the crowds listened to Jesus for hours and hours…so long that they got really hungry. And Jesus had compassion on them and wanted to make sure they had something to eat. And here’s how it happened…” The story of the loaves and fishes. Small bits of food that became enough to suffice. Sort of like that small mustard seed of faith, that small scoop of yeast, those few drops of water from the baptismal font, that, though seemingly small, contain all the energy and hope and power and life and trust needed to change the world.

It’s a parable—a simple story that illustrates a spiritual truth. You can’t take it literally. As one commentator (Barbara Cawthorne Crafton) noted wisely: “don’t try this at your next church meeting!”

I mean, really, who knows what that little boy thought when his meager picnic lunch miraculously became food enough for that whole crowd?! As Crafton notes: “there is enough. In fact, there is more than enough. Jesus knows this, but nobody else seems to. Why would they? They can count—five loaves and two fish versus all those people. So it’s just Jesus and the little boy against all the voices of common sense.”

Did you hear how it happened? The wording is almost exactly like the Words of Institution in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He took the loaves of bread, he gave thanks to God, and he gave it to the people. We can almost imagine him thinking to himself: may they do this to remember me…may they do this to remember the life-giving power of the creating Spirit of God…may they do this to remember the essential role they each play in my on-going story of abundant life for all.

We are privileged to have hanging in our Chapel narthex a gorgeous serigraph by the LA artist John August Swanson. It depicts in vibrant colors the familiar story of the Loaves and Fishes. The day we dedicated it, John came to be with us and described the incredible process of layering color upon color upon color upon color to create the finished piece.
In his artist’s notes, John wrote that his first depiction of this story contains “bright colors, rolling hills and high floating clouds. The people are wearing garments with many colors and patterns, inspired by the creations of the makers of cloth, the weavers, and the dyers of Central America, Mexico, and parts of Africa and India.” John shifts the emphasis from an inexplicable miracle done by God to the miracle of what happens when we share whatever we have with one another.

He says: “my image of LOAVES AND FISHES emphasizes and reminds us of the basic needs of all humanity. We all share the need for food and for providing for our families and communities. If we take the cosmic view, that there currently exists enough of what we need to sustain the world; we urgently need to consider sharing the resources that have been entrusted to us.”

Contrast that to the disciple Philip whose first response to Jesus is, in effect, to tell him that he’s nuts. Are you crazy, Jesus?, he seems to ask. Six months wages would not be enough, not be enough to feed all these hungry people.

For disciples who are convinced that what they do have could not possibly be enough, the possibilities are necessarily next to nothing. And that’s the key to the spiritual breakthrough that Jesus is looking for. That’s the heart of this parable about the kingdom. Jesus wants to give us new eyes. Jesus, the Lord of the Dance, wants us to believe and to dream big.

Helen Keller said: “although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” Do we believe that? Do we act like we believe that? Do we live like we believe that? Or are we trapped in a prison called “not enough,” prisoners of our own pitiful lack of imagination, trust, and hope?

For if we, like those first disciples, who have all been created in the super-abundance of our extravagantly generous God…if we, disciples of Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again to give us life in abundance…if we still look at who we are, and who God is, and what we have, no matter how meager, and can still only say that we don’t have enough, then we have not yet been saved by the amazing grace of Jesus Christ. If we remain focused on what we do not have, then truly we are still conformed to this world, as Paul says in Romans, and have not been transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are still not able to discern the will of God for us and for this world—that is, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The Word of God comes to us this day to jump off the pages of this ancient book and bring us life and life in abundance. What a word for us, now, in these days when, on so many levels, the future is unknowable. The parable of kingdom hope in this story comes to us to show us how to look at what is available and trust that it is enough. It comes to invite us to look inside ourselves and believe that who we are and what we bring is enough. The parable of kingdom hope in this story comes to us this day to show us how to believe that the power of God is always bigger than what we see. The power of God is always enough. The power of God comes in bright colors and with exuberant joy. The power of God brings life for the world and hope for our hearts and bread for hungry people. The power of God, the ever-creating Spirit of God, gives us hearts to imagine what might be. And it is always, it is always...the power of God is always more than enough.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes:


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