

GOSPEL READING: John 6:1-15

Sometime 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 signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Festival 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, "It would take more than half a year's wages^[a] to 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 they sat down (about five thousand men were there).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, "Now, 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 sign Jesus performed, 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.

Psalm 34:1-10,22

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ² My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. ³ O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. ⁴ I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. ⁷ The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸ O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. ⁹ O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. ¹⁰ The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. ²² The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

“In the Bread Business”

“Is the bread on the table?”, my mother would ask as we were setting it. *“You need to get it there.”* And one of us would take a few slices, put it on a small plate, and place the plate on the center of the table. We didn’t serve it with little ceramic bowls of whipped butter. We didn’t put a silken white napkin over it. It was a very simple thing, but bread was made present at every meal. This is because in our culture, in our time...as in some many, if not all, cultures of the world, across all of time, bread has a central place. Whether it’s called pandesal, or chapati, or tortilla, or tava or tortilla, or baguette or aysh or injera or challa or naan...whether it’s fried or baked or toasted, or boiled or grilled...whether is flat or raised...or served with salsa, gravy, or jam...it is, in one way or another, at the center. It’s at the center of our nourishment, a staple in our diets, (even though some of us are trying to be low-carb), and it’s at the center of our living, our relationships, our conversation, our hospitality around those tables. Bread connects us to each other, to our cultures, to the earth, to our history. It connects us to our faith story. Bread connects us to our God.

Yes, bread. Today’s lesson has bread at its center. It’s a familiar story of Jesus’ ministry, the only one that it is recorded in all four gospels. You remember. Jesus had just received the devastating news that his beloved cousin, the prophet, John the Baptist, had just been arrested and beheaded by Herod. And Jesus was so deeply saddened by the news that he had to withdraw in a boat to a deserted place to be alone. But the crowd that had been following him for days, listening to him teach wondrous new things...love instead of hate, gentleness instead of force, compassion instead of fear...was unaware of his heartbroken condition and continued in their pursuit of him. They were desperate to hear more, and to “bring their sick and lame to be healed, and their children to be touched and blessed.”¹ They followed him along the lakeshore.

There were about 5000 men, probably 15,000 or so counting women and children. A lot of people. And it was getting late. Jesus’ disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss the crowd, if for no

¹ John Buchanan. *“In Remembrance of Him”*. <http://www.fouthchurch.org/sermons/2011/100211.html>. (accessed 7-24-2018).

other reason than it made them nervous. But Jesus, being who Jesus is, wanted to feed them. Out of his own pain and sadness, out of his deep compassion, he directed that the disciples to see to it.

We can only imagine the disciples' confusion. They knew that it would cost an inordinate amount to buy enough food and of course, there was nowhere nearby to do that anyway. There was only this one little boy with 5 loaves of bread and two fish. Yet Jesus was not daunted. He told them to not only distribute these loaves of bread and fish but to collect the leftovers! And miraculously, when the disciples began to share what they had, there was ample enough for everyone, and a fragments enough remaining to fill 12 baskets.

I suppose that we've all wondered how that really happened. How did Jesus do that? But the real question that is at the center of the story is, "why?" Why did Jesus ask the disciples to do that? Walter Brueggemann, who I can now claim that I know, says that "*when you are with Jesus you are inescapably in the bread business.* I love that! And, he says, "*you need bread to share because it is the work of Jesus to feed hungry people and it is the work of Jesus to express compassion concretely.*"² It seems that "*there is an ethical imperative in this story about the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ on earth....that is, to feed hungry people.*"³

And it is not just to do so physically. As the disciples shared the loaves and fish, their perspectives were changed from ones of scarcity...doubting their own abilities and their limited goods...to perspectives of abundance...trusting in God to provide. Bodies AND souls were fed. It seems that the disciples were hungry too. Like us, they were hungry for the bread of life, hungry for the bread of affliction, hungry for the bread of heaven. So, the imperative in the story is not only ethical in nature. It is also spiritual. "We need" Studes Terkel says, "*to be transformed by the grace of God that we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ such that we can live abundantly, opening our hands, sharing what we have, confident that our meager resources, trusted in God's hands, will themselves always be transformed into abundance.*"⁴

² Walter Brueggemann. "*The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*" (Knoxville: WJKP; 2011), 236.

³ John Buchanan. "*In Remembrance of Him*".

⁴ Studes Terkel. Quoted in John Buchanan, "*In Remembrance of Him*"

So, this is why we need to volunteer at the local food bank, make a shopping trip for the sole purpose of purchasing food, say for the Cove House or Cove Soup Kitchen, to make an extra casserole when we're making our own for the caring casserole program, to bring a loaf of bread on sandwich making day. This is why we do it especially when we are beginning to worry about how much we have...when we begin to feel our scarcity. Sharing what we have is the way to fill up our starving souls, to become richly fed with the abundance that God has for us. Giving is the way to change ourselves from a perspective of scarcity to one of abundance.

(long pause) Now...let's look at this faith story in yet an even bigger way: During my time in Seminary, I was introduced to the concept of sacramental living. I had previously only understood the word, sacrament, to be associated with our celebration of the two Sacraments, Lord's Supper and Baptism and to be defined as an outward sign of an inward grace. The symbols of bread and wine and water served to remind us. However, sacramental living, I came to understand is seeing the whole world and all that is in it, as a means of grace, as a means to encounter God's mystical presence and reality with us. It is looking at the mundane and ordinary and seeing the sacred and eternal...seeking IN the physical, the things which are spiritual. Paul was talking about sacramental living when he said, "*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*" Kenneth Howell says that sacramental living is cultivating a mindset which recognizes the Divine in the human, the invisible in the visible, the grace of God working through ordinary people, situations, and objects.⁵ *(pause)*. I was told in seminary that the way to cultivate such a mindset, the way to begin to live life sacramentally, would best be done by simply choosing something simple as bread and get in the habit of considering how it connects us to our faith story and to God. Then to look at more and more things this way.

Marilynne Robinson wrote a prize-winning book called, *Gilead*. It is a recounting by John Ames of the experiences of his father and grandfather for his son. All three men were

⁵Kenneth Howell. *A Sacramental Worldview: Five Essentials of Conversion, Part III*. <https://chnetwork.org/2015/05/05/eternity-five-essentials-conversion-part-three-sacramental-worldview/> (accessed 7-27-18).

Congregationalist ministers in Gilead, Iowa. One recollection that he describes so poignantly is receiving 'communion' from his father at the remains of a Baptist church, burned by lightning.

“It rained the day we came to pull the church down. The roof and steeple had fallen into the sanctuary. The pulpit was still intact, standing there in the rain, but the pews were mostly kindling...It was a warm day, a warm rain, and there was no real shelter, so everybody ignored it, more or less. All kinds of people came to help. It was like a camp meeting and a picnic both....They were all singing hymns, and the wind blew the rain in gusts and the spray would reach where we kids were, underneath the wagon, on a quilt, out of the way. When the adults had gathered up all the books that were ruined, they made two graves for them, and put the Bibles in one and the hymnals in the other, and then the minister said a prayer over them. ...The women put the dampened pies and cakes they had brought and the books that could still be used into our wagon and then covered it all with planks and tarps and lap robes. The men put the pulpit under a tree and covered it with a horse blanket, and they salvaged whatever else they could, which amounted to mostly shingles and nails... The ashes turned liquid in the rain and the men who were working in the ruins got entirely black and filthy, till you would hardly know one from another. (And then, and then, it happened)....My father brought me some biscuit. It had soot on it from his hands. “Nevermind,” he said, “there’s nothing cleaner than ash.” (pause) “Strange are the uses of adversity.” [While I know it happened the way I’ve described it, I remember it differently] I remember that my father got down on his heels beside the wagon, rain water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers. I remember that as he did, the grand old women, with their hair falling down their backs like schoolgirls, sang “The Old Rugged Cross” as they saw to things, moving so gently, almost as if they were dancing to the hymn. It was joyful AND sad thing...I took communion from my father’s hand, that morning. I remember it that way and I believe that’s what it was.”⁶

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, “Gilead” (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 2004),94-96.

Every time, friends, that bread is placed at the center of our tables, every time we break it together, we can remember how it connects us...to each other, to our earth, to our faith story, to God. When we see it or taste it or feel it or smell it, we can remember that our God is the One who through provision of manna taught the Hebrews to trust in his providential care. We can remember that our God is the One who affirmed the pure faith of a poor widow who out of her meager ingredients made bread for Elijah. We can remember that our God is the One who, with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, taught that his followers to feed the hungry and to do so from a perspective of abundance not scarcity. We can remember. And through our remembering, we will encounter God's mystical presence with us, as God has always been with God's people. Yes, friends, every time we take note, really take note of God's world around us, we can be inspired to go forth and live sacramentally, differently, abundantly, in remembrance of him. *"After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Amen.*

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