

Sermon on John 6:1-21
8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Perhaps you recognize this situation. Some friends stop by from out of town for a visit, unexpected, and you enjoy an afternoon of conversation about “old times”, and catching up on what is new in each others’ lives. The time flies by. All of a sudden, you notice that it is getting late, past suppertime, and you haven’t planned on having guests for supper. You have a dilemma. Should you invite them to stay and eat dinner with you, or should I drop some hints that it was great to see them but it’s time for them to go? You decide that you would like to invite them for dinner, but your spouse does not agree. “We have nothing thawed out, we haven’t planned for this, we have nothing to serve them – why can’t they just go out to a restaurant, like they said they planned to do?” You say “no way!” “They are friends of ours, and we can surely find something to eat for them!” So you invite them to stay, you look through the refrigerator for some vegetables and fruit, you thaw out some meat in the microwave, and within the hour, *voila!* Dinner is served! All eat their fill, you have a grand time, and everyone goes home happy and satisfied. Has this ever happened for you? Maybe not – if you don’t cook – maybe you did end up ordering out for pizza, or going out to eat with them – it’s a new world, I know! But in our house, Kim and I would probably scrounge something together for a meal. Not just because we are too “cheap” to go out (though we are!). Because we know that we can always find something to eat in our house, and our kitchen is open 24 hours....How about you?

Well, today’s gospel lesson is one of my favorites – and not just because it’s about food! It’s the feeding of the 5000 – and I like it because in this story, Jesus and his disciples are faced with a dilemma: how to feed 5000 hungry people when no restaurants or markets are nearby (and all they can find are five loaves and two fish in a child’s picnic basket)! Jesus performs a miracle – but it may not be the miracle you think – and the disciples and crowd are all involved in the miracle. It’s a miracle story that points to Jesus as the Son of God (with the feeding of so many hungry people being the sign), but it’s also a story about leadership, and about discipleship, and what we can do if we listen to Jesus, have faith, and are willing to share.

It starts with Jesus arriving on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, faced with a great crowd of people who kept following him. They were attracted to him “like bugs to a light in the darkness” because of the signs Jesus did for the sick. As he healed more people of their diseases (in a world with few doctors – especially for the poor), word kept spreading and more people kept coming to see Jesus, hear him speak, and seek his healing. Jesus tried to get away with his disciples to rest and

ponder his next move, so he went up the side of a mountain. Then he saw the crowds coming to him, and realized that it was getting late, and the people were hungry. What were they to do?

So Jesus put the question to his disciples. Where should they go to buy food for the people to eat? Philip answered the obvious – this was a big crowd, and they didn't have enough money to feed them all – “six months wages were not enough to buy bread for everyone”. Okay, so a run to the market was out of the question. What else could they do? Andrew said they found this boy nearby, and he had a basket of five loaves of bread and two fish – but you must be kidding, Jesus, that isn't nearly enough. (I like Andrew's answer – it's what we would say! We would look just a little bit, like in our pockets and to one another quickly, and come to the immediate conclusion that “we looked, but we don't have enough!” We do this in church all the time, don't we?) We look at things and see *scarcity* – to us the glass is always half empty, even when we know it is at least half full! We don't have enough! We can't feed the whole world, Jesus, so why should we even try?

Well, then Jesus went to work. He told all the people to sit down, all 5000 of them. He took the loaves of bread that the disciples had gathered from this child, and blessed them. First he thanked God for what God had given them, the bread, then the fish. Then he started passing out the loaves of bread, and had his disciples pass them out throughout the crowd, and they kept distributing bread until everyone was fed and satisfied. And after they had all eaten, he had the disciples gather up the leftovers, which filled twelve baskets full of bread! When the people saw what Jesus had done, they wanted to make him “king” then and there – so Jesus had to get out of there fast and go further up the mountain by himself.

So how did Jesus do it? Was it magic? Did Jesus keep pulling loaves and fish out of a basket, like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat? I don't think so, though the scripture doesn't say he didn't! There's no video tape, so we can't run a replay like they do on tv. Now, you could read this story and believe that God gave Jesus the power to turn stones into bread, or whatever he had to do, to make these loaves appear. It is possible, if Jesus is the Son of God, so believe it if you wish, it's okay! That's how I always heard this as a child, that Jesus made the loaves of bread appear. Thanks be to God!

But there's another way of understanding this story that I think makes it even more powerful. I think that when Jesus started blessing the bread and passing it out to everyone, he made his disciples look that much harder to find bread and fish for him to bless. They went further than just that one little boy (whose meager picnic basket had been their excuse to not try any harder at first and get out of the task of feeding so many). They started working the crowd, and telling people what Jesus was doing - “look! He's just blessing the bread and passing it out to everybody!” and soon everybody who had anything was giving it to the disciples to be blessed by Jesus, and distributed to the crowd. Like the movie “*Pay it*

Forward”, they saw the example of Jesus and other people sharing their food, and soon they were sharing it themselves!

So which is the greater miracle? Seeing Jesus magically create bread to be given to hungry crowds of people? Or motivating 5000 people who didn’t know each other to share their own bread with others, so that everyone had enough? I think the greater miracle is the example Jesus set of thanking God for the little bit being shared, and expecting this whole crowd of people to share as well, and getting his disciples to organize all 5000 of them so that everyone had enough to eat! Jesus transformed our typical human complaint of scarcity – of never having enough – into a great miracle of God’s abundance, making us realize that the abundance was there from the beginning, and we just never see it.

So is this story about Jesus, or is it about us? Sure, it’s a story about Jesus, and a sign that he is the Son of God, able to do great things to feed and heal the people of this world. Jesus surely is the main actor, the center focus, the primary motivator of what happens in this story. But it’s also a story about what his disciples and the crowd of 5000 people were able to do: they were able to pool all their meager resources, and by sharing them, everyone was able to eat, and there were leftovers remaining!

So this story is also about us! It’s about you and me. When have you thought that you don’t have enough for yourself, or to share with others? We all hear that a lot – especially lately, since the “economic crisis” hit America – but I don’t see any of us starving to death. We are afraid of what might happen in the future, that we’re going to run out of money, or food. We think we don’t know enough, or have enough skills to get by.

But Jesus says we all do have enough! You and I may be lacking in some skill, or maybe we don’t even have enough to eat, but in the community of faith, through the church, we do have enough – when we learn to share with others, and give of ourselves. We may have a small church, a small number of people in a changing neighborhood, but when we come together and we share, we have great worship, and we do great things! Lives are changed when we come together in faith, that could never happen if we stayed to ourselves. It’s not that we’re so great, individually, but when we come together as the Church, God does great things with us! And it doesn’t just happen within these walls. Jesus is calling you and me to get beyond our individual feelings of inadequacy and scarcity, and become the persons God has created you and me to be, inside here in the Church on Sunday, and outside these wall in the world on Monday and beyond! God has given each of us a gift, actually many gifts, and through faith we can change the world when we share our gifts with others. For with God *all things are possible!* And with faith in God, you and I together can feed the world! Thanks be to God. Amen.