

Sermon on John 6:1-21
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Some say that the gospel reading today from John has given us definite proof as to the origins of the Lutheran “pot luck”. Where does the idea for the pot luck supper come from? Well, you can trace it back to Jesus, and the feeding of the 5000 – of course! So I am going to spend some time today talking about that most famous of all community meals (second only, perhaps, to the “Last Supper”). This is the first of five Sundays that we will spend with John’s gospel. We’re not in Mark anymore, until the end of August. So the rest of our summer we’ll spend with John – which means we’ll have to read our words more carefully, and slower. Because John is more concerned with symbolism, and showing the “signs” that identify Jesus as the Son of God, while Mark is much more direct, telling the actions of Jesus with as few words as possible, to show his power from God. So, let’s get on with it!

The gospel says that Jesus had just crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (also known as the Sea of Tiberias – in honor of the Roman emperor Tiberias). It’s hard to find this on your GPS! Anyway, there was a big crowd following Jesus, like usual, because they saw the “signs” he performed – namely, he was healing all the sick! So in the days before universal health care, of course Jesus was popular! The Passover was approaching – the most important Jewish religious holiday. And like Moses in the Old Testament, Jesus went up the mountain to get away from the crowds, to pray and meet with his inner circle, the disciples. Then, like Elisha in our first lesson, Jesus finds he has a large crowd to feed. But not mere hundreds, it was a crowd numbering in the thousands.

The people coming up the mountain are hungry, and there is no city nearby. What should they do? So Jesus asked Philip “Where are we going to buy bread for all these people to eat?” (This was a test, by the way.) Phillip said that six months wages wouldn’t buy enough bread for the people to eat. There were a lot of people, too many for they themselves to feed. They obviously couldn’t do it. The disciples saw scarcity – they didn’t have enough! But Jesus saw God’s abundance – God would provide all that they needed to eat! So he would show them how.

Now, in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s gospels, the next thing Jesus said to the disciples is “You give them something to eat!” In other words, figure it out – if you don’t have the money. So the disciples scrounged up five loaves of bread and two fish, then Jesus thanked God, broke the bread, and they shared it all until everyone had eaten. That’s the story I prefer! That Jesus gets the people to share till all are fed – this is a great miracle in itself!

But in John's gospel the disciples found a boy with five loaves and two fish, and so Jesus took the bread, lifted it up in thanks to God and then shared that boy's food until everyone was satisfied. (Can you see the symbolism of the Holy Eucharist here?) All the disciples did was collect the leftovers – twelve baskets full (one for every disciple!). On this, all four gospels agree.

So let's look at this story through modern eyes. The big problem Jesus faced here was that big crowd of thousands approaching, and no plans made ahead of time for feeding them. Now, what are the options, the challenges and the opportunities that we might see today? If you are a socialist, or a politician, you might say, it is the state's responsibility to make sure that the people are fed, so you promise to set up a government program. If you are a capitalist, you say: there are 5000 people needing to eat, they are hungry, and have no food with them. This is a tremendous opportunity for PROFIT! So you happily send out your fast-food restaurant managers and workers to bring box lunches to the people, at a high profit. Even if you charge low prices, you are a bigger winner, because you can sell a lot to this captive market!

But if you are Jesus, you look at your disciples and say this is not the time to go to the government for help, or an opportunity for profit. Instead, you say "You feed them, yourself!" If you are going to be a disciple of Jesus, you don't look to the state, or to possible profits, but YOU feed them! You are all hungry, and you all need bread! So you need to share – and the best way is to thank God for what you have been given, and start sharing. Then the miracles start!

So what does this mean for us today, as the Church? It means when people are hungry, we listen to Jesus, and share. It doesn't mean necessarily handing out food for free, but it might. It could be starting a food shelf. It could mean starting a food ministry, like that of Loaves and Fishes, or other daily meal programs. It could also mean figuring out together, with the community, how to pull enough resources together so that everyone can have something to eat, every day. It could mean raising the minimum wage, or increasing the wages of workers so that every one can purchase what they need to eat. There are all kinds of possibilities.

The image of the Church as disciples feeding one another and all who are hungry is common to our ministry! It can start as simply as Sunday morning coffee hour, when after worship we come downstairs for fellowship. How do the coffee and treats magically appear? Does a little church elf set them out overnight? No, somebody makes the coffee, somebody else brings in some treats every week. Most often it is one person, truth be told. But a lot of people take a turn!

Now, when there is a potluck, we have to figure out how 50 or more people will get a decent meal, without going to a caterer or restaurant and buying all the food. The idea is, that everyone brings something, and everyone shares. Kind of like what we are doing for our church picnic today. Everyone bring a dish to share,

hot dogs and beverages will be provided. We hope that works. It usually does. It usually comes out with everyone getting something to eat. It's an imperfect system, which relies on a whole lot of faith, hope and love. And patience – because we all don't get our favorite foods to eat!

But we know that Jesus calls us to do much more important work than this. There are a lot of hungry people out there, and many need shelter, too. So every March we host Project Home families, who sleep in the church undercroft every night. We provide an evening snack and breakfast. We bring some volunteers, other churches pitch in also. It all works out. But we didn't create this ourselves. God planted the idea in some faithful person's mind, who shared it with others, and we have been invited to participate. 12 months out of every year churches provide shelter as well as food for families in emergency situations. That's a miracle!

Countless miracles happen when faithful people work together to share food as a witness to faith. One night in June we had over 30 youth and adults volunteer for Feed My Starving Children in Eagan. We all showed up at a warehouse, and learned how to pack nutritious meals in bags that would feed thousands of children in places around the world. Along with over 100 total volunteers that night, we packed several thousand meals – enough to feed scores of children for a year! Now, that's doing something! And we were encouraged in our faith!

Using the same principle, the Loaves and Fishes organization in St. Paul combines donated food with volunteers from many congregations and organizations, to feed thousands of people every night, in over 20 host sites around the Twin Cities. Last Wednesday, at our Music on the Blacktop event on Redeemer's parking lot, the Loaves and Fishes food truck came with tacos to feed everyone who showed up. It was their first time with the truck, and 66 people ate. For free. No charge. Zip. Nada. But it brought us all together, along with the music by Songs of Hope.

It gets even better. Last week at the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, one generous couple challenged all 30,000 youth and adults to make a donation to ELCA World Hunger "Walk for Water" campaign. They would match up to \$500,000 with their own money! So each day, people and congregations made financial donations – over \$125,000 the first day, then up to \$230,000 the second day. The third day brought it up over \$300,000 – and by Sunday there was over \$402,000 donated! With the match, it could be over \$1 million! It all started with nothing, then two people stepped up to make a challenging pledge, and who knows how much good will come of it? But that's what happens when we all pitch in and do our part, responding to Jesus' words – "You give them something to eat or drink!" Together.

Far too often you and I think of scarcity in this world. We never have enough. And the problem of hunger is so large – who can solve it? But Jesus

teaches us not to only look at how little we have, or how small we are, but instead look with faith at God's abundance, and how much we have when we share!!!! We follow Jesus, for whom it is common to make something great out of nothing, who can take our meager gifts of faith, and create a tremendous witness of love! Sure, we are a small congregation, but look what even we can do as a group! And when we join with a whole synod, or with our whole ELCA together, we can do wondrous things!

We know that we have a small number of youth here at Redeemer – we only brought five youth and two adults to the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit last week. But like five loaves and two fishes (ah-ha!! There's our own symbolism!) our small numbers were multiplied thousands of times over. Together with 29,993 other youth and adults, we were able to fill Ford Field in Detroit every night for worship. Together, 10,000 went out each day into the neighborhoods of Detroit to clear away brush and clean up trash over 900 square blocks. 1,847 mural boards were painted to place on 319 vacant homes boarded up. 3,200 vacant lots were cleared of debris. 1,425 backpacks were distributed. 36 urban gardens were installed. 99 picnic tables were built. 26 dumpsters filled, and 1 million diapers were donated at the Gathering – in four days! So our five loaves and two fishes, five females and two males, were part of something much bigger, a greater witness of love, to the glory of God! 30,000 lives were transformed, and their faiths encouraged! And you sent them! They couldn't have gone without your support!

So whenever you think that you are not so much, or we are not so much as a congregation, just think about this! With God, and together with the whole of Christ's church, we are so much more than what we are alone! Our perceived scarcity is thus turned into God's great abundance, and we are a powerful witness to God's love in Christ Jesus! So thanks be to God for the great gift of God's abundant love in Christ Jesus our Lord, and help us to know always that "God is good!" **All the time.** All the time. **God is good!** Amen.