



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

No Loaf Left Behind

July 26, 2009

The Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6:1-21

Well, here it is. The last *Ann Arbor News*. I haven't read it, haven't taken it out of the plastic. I have a strong urge to save this piece of history, to put it in my special box that holds my grandpa's bible, the ceramic ash tray I made at summer camp in 1977, and my children's baby teeth. After all, I love the paper. I love the ink on my hands, the tactile feel of the newspaper, no matter how thin it has become in recent months. It's a part of my routine every night when I get home. My community's paper means something to me, and I'll bet, to you, too. It's an artifact, a remnant of the last 170 years of the local news. This item is now, sad to say, a fragment of the past.

Surely you have a special box of things you've saved, too, things that when you come across them again, they take you back to a different time and place. When we've moved on from the past, when a meaningful event in our lives has ended, objects and pictures help protect our memory. To pick up those pieces of history again and hold them is to more vividly remember that time. Our recollection of history fades - but such tangible mementoes revive our memories, sometimes the past can even come flooding back. When I see this folded up newspaper in the years to come, I'll always remember the experience of print news and the 'good ole days' of traditional journalism.

It seems that reading today's familiar Bible story takes me back to the good ole' days of miracles. The Gospel stories call us back to a time when miracles occurred, the kind we all agree were miracles. I know that if I'd been one of the 5,000, fed with holy food on that Galilean hillside all those years ago, I would have looked for something to keep. A sliver of grass. A perfect dandelion. A basket that held bread. The feeding of the 5,000 was the kind of event that you'd remember as long as you lived - the picture of all those people, en masse, trailing after the young carpenter; the little poor boy with the five barley loaves offering them to Philip, Jesus coming by and placing the meal in your hands, the meal that just kept on giving. . . we would all want to hold onto it. Those who penned the Gospels surely understood that, which is why all four writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - recorded versions of it - the *only miracle* recorded in all the Gospels. By the time the story was written down, the memories had blurred a little. Each version turned out a little different, but note the common ending. They all agree, there were leftovers. Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke the five loaves, blessed the 2 fish. And through holy multiplication, all 5,000 and more were fed, satisfied, and left with 12 baskets of bread as reminders of the sacramental moment. There were no commemorative items for sale - no t-shirts, no keychains, no DVDs in HD. They had their unforgettable memories, and these 12 loaves.

So, where did it go, this bread? How did they decide who got to keep it? Did they cast lots? Have a raffle? Were the disciples who handled the clean-up left with them? I doubt the 5,000 fought over the leftover miracle bread. Because, frankly, it didn't end well, this miracle- there was not the feel-good moment we've imagined. The Gospel writers understood what a watershed moment in Jesus' career this miracle was, but nobody at the time seemed to get it. Those gathered on the grass may have been temporarily overwhelmed by the awesome miracle that Jesus performed, but, by the end of the sixth chapter of John, they were underwhelmed with Jesus the man and his message. They were *so* let-down by him, that practically by the time the last loaf was collected, the first followers started to turn on him.

Here was the largest crowd ever gathered around Jesus, the height of his popularity. These followers were hungry to know him. He gave them supernatural powers, abilities, resources, and they were awed and impressed. And then he gave them something more. He taught them that the bread and the fish were mere symbols of much deeper meaning and truth - the living bread, the giving of his life for them. Reinforcing his message, Jesus himself distributed bread and pickled fish that kept regenerating before their very eyes. But they could not hear what he was saying. They misunderstood his powers. They wanted his miraculous abilities put to their use, to free them from Roman Rule, to feed them for real. They wanted to make Him their king. And when they learned that he didn't come for that reason, they prepared to take him by force. As Jesus made his escape, and withdrew, the damage had been done. The crowd had turned on him.

Later, he tried again to explain that his mission there was a spiritual one, not a political one. He explained how he could give them what they needed, not what they wanted. He was to be a king unlike any other - a king to empty himself of his power, not use it to meet their materialistic needs. But by the end of it all, he seems to have blown it. The bread and fish used to illustrate his instruction would be used instead to fuel his destruction, to begin building the case against him. So, what happened to the leftovers? Who got the fragments, the remnants of the meal, the memorabilia of the dramatic day? Doubtful that the disciples packaged them up in doggie-bags. Along with their expectations and desires, they were probably cast under foot, the bread discarded as feast for the birds.

This well-worn story – have we saved it? Or cast it under foot, too? When you think of the stories and passages from scripture that you cling to in life, and in death, when you think of the stories that you've actually talked about with your children - is this one of them? I wonder. It's so overdone, so familiar. It's hard to connect to in a world of poverty. Today, a child dies every five seconds from hunger. By the time this sermon is over, 144 kids will have died in the world from lack of food. What's a story like this worth to us today? And, like all miracles, it's hard to believe. Miracles are stories that demonstrate Jesus' power. He can turn water into wine. He can turn a little bread and fish into a satisfying meal for thousands. He can raise Lazarus from the dead. But they are so yesterday, they don't happen anymore. They make us question a God who *can* work miracles, but chooses not revisit the "good ole days" of miracles. We rarely pray for miracles, but we all know, we'd sure like some. Turn conflict into peace in the Middle East, and we'll be impressed. Turn Africa into an ethical political landscape. Turn brain cancer into a walk in the park. Stop Alzheimer's with a vaccine. Turn back tsunamis. Feed the world. Those are the miracles we'd like to see. To some degree, we know that demonstrations of God's power like this are rare, indeed.

Only that's not what miracles are. Peter Gomes, that Harvard preacher who stood in this pulpit 8 weeks ago, doesn't think miracles are about God's power at all. He writes that "At its essence, a miracle is a message from God to us. It is an illustration or demonstration of the message that God chooses to

communicate to us. It is an exercise not in the supernatural or in the irregular, but in communication. To understand a miracle is therefore to understand something of God. To see a miracle is to see something of God.” So, we might say, miracles are not at all about God’s power, but about God’s nature. In them, we experience the very essence of who God is and what God’s purpose for the world is. And maybe, just maybe, God is communicating more than we know, miracles in this way are happening every day.

But if the feeding of the 5,000 is a message, what message is it? What is the content here? What is the communication that God has with us? In the Gospel of John, in a way that is different than any other version of this story, that content, and that communication, is all about God’s generosity. It’s a story of abundance. It’s a story of grace. It’s a story of hospitality. That’s what John is communicating about God, for God, to us. John’s whole purpose is to show God’s abundance. John calls Jesus the Word from “whose fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” Jesus turns water into not just any wine, but good wine, and there’s plenty of it. To the woman at the well, Jesus talks about the living water gushing up to eternal life. This is the Jesus of John, who provides in his Father’s house, “many dwelling places.” In John, there is always more than enough, an overwhelming supply. The grace and generosity of God expressed in and through Jesus is overflowing. It is never miserly.

The feeding of the 5,000 was a communication of God’s nature – his generosity and his abundant grace. Here, Jesus was the host. Here, Jesus was the server. In fact, it was all Jesus’ idea to begin with. Did anyone say they were hungry? No. Did anyone think there was going to be a meal? No. There was no expectation or need that was put out there. These followers were interested in healing. So, in John, Jesus set up - on his own - this opportunity to communicate God’s message. He asked Philip, “where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him because he knew what he was going to do. He created a situation they had not expected, had not asked for, and then he provided abundantly to them. Jesus had them sit down in the grass, not to meet their need, but his nature. His essence is to be a God of abundant giving, life-altering grace that is available for all, enough for each one of us, with much left over. Jesus called this moment together to communicate – he wasn’t going to come and meet every little physical need, but instead, meet our deeper hunger, our spiritual need. To give more than we could ever ask or imagine.

It’s easier to accept a miracle if it’s less about God being powerful and more about God desiring to speak with us. But if accepting the miraculous here becomes easier, perhaps the communication itself is harder. God is an abundant, generous giver. Such theology can challenge those of us who wonder more about God’s scarcity and conservation than God’s overflowing outpouring of all that is good. We know so many in need. The news websites will continue to tell us about that, long after the Ann Arbor news has been recycled. We pray out of our need, rather than our fullness. We are “deficit detectives”, looking for all the ways we, and others around us, are lacking in things material, but also things spiritual. We look for the ways we aren’t measuring up. Our theology is more about scarcity than about generosity. Our spirituality tends to focus on our emptiness, rather than admitting we really are full of the Holy Spirit. John’s message is the opposite. Jesus, who abundantly gave and revealed his generous nature, is the same today. We have everything we need, and there is plenty left over. Do you believe that?

When my grandmother was 100 years old, she became a Jehovah’s Witness. A person of deep Christian faith her whole life, her physical infirmities kept her from attending church. She lived long enough that her communities of faith changed or moved or closed, and she lost contact with the people of faith she had known earlier in her life. In her last years of life, when the Witnesses would knock on her door, she found herself willing to welcome them in, to listen to them, to have their companionship. Slowly, over

the last few years of her life, she was in their debt, for their presence and their prayers. In what was an act of gratitude, not of belief, she converted. Our family respected her decision and found the grace in it, as it brought her comfort. When she peacefully died, I realized the full extent of her decision. Her funeral was a service for a “witness,” and the focus of the service was not a celebration of her life, but an opportunity to give testimony of the congregation’s faith to the gathered grieving. There was no mention of her beautiful life, or her loving spirit. At the age of 102, when she died, the question seemed to be, would she make it to heaven? It might help to understand that the theology of Jehovah’s Witnesses says that in heaven, Christ will gather with 144,000 souls. Those who are not named among the 144,000 will still die, but remain in limbo. After Armageddon, whenever that happens, those who did not make the 144,000 will live eternally on earth, but an earth that will become as paradise. Witnesses give their lives to living faith authentically, and sharing their beliefs about life, death, and eternal life.

Not to judge their faith, but it was not ours. My cousins and I sat there, comfortless. When the graveside service concluded, her coffin sat over the grave, ready to be lowered in. We’d taken just about as much as we could take. We’d been respectful for hours. At the last moment, when we could hold it in no more, one of us broke the silence by singing *Amazing Grace*. The family joined in, and we sang every verse. While the tears flowed, we gave those gathered something real and true to witness.

You see, the God we knew from the witness of scripture is a God full of grace. Jesus, we believe, is radically generous, supremely hospitable, superbly loving. Her funeral had been all about educating us of God’s urgent need that we convert people so that they may be saved, that God will select the best for heaven, for presence with him. That’s not our Jesus. Our Jesus was the Jesus present at the feeding of the 5,000, a God who provided enough for all, with 12 baskets left over. He was a God who emptied himself that we would have grace upon grace, a heaven full of many rooms, that “whosoever believeth in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.” The love of God in Jesus Christ is extensive, inclusive, wonderful, abundant.

So what happened to the left-over loaves? There was one basket for each disciple. They are ours now. No loaf was left behind - they were given to us. It’s for you, to take it, bless it, distribute it, that all would see the manifold gifts of God, good enough to sustain us in any need. Go fill bellies, and go fill souls, God says. Our needs are real, our hurts stay with us, our questions do not disappear, but to them all, God speaks. Find a way to live out of God’s abundance. Care for others with God’s generosity. To our troubled economy, our troubled souls, our fearful hearts, the headline remains the same - “Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost.” In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.