

TIME AFTER PENTECOST; Lectionary 17, Proper 12 (B-RCL) – July 29, 2018

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6: 1-21
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA; Imogene A. Stulken

*Ecumenical Prayer Cycle:
Republic of Congo, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe*

Today's Gospel text reminds me of a story that Susan Thomas once told. (Susan served as pastor here at UniLu from 1983 to 1995.) To make sure the details in my mind were accurate, I e-mailed Susan, who responded promptly. So here, in her words, is the story:

Michael and I, early in our marriage, probably in September of 1972, [which, parenthetically, is when I first came to the East and to UniLu] made a trip from Minnesota to visit St. Olaf friends [Charlie and Barb] in Cambridge. Charlie was a second or third year student at HDS [Harvard Divinity School] at the time. While there, we attended the (opening?) chapel Eucharist offered by Dean Krister Stendahl. Charlie noted there were more people present at the service than usual. We gathered in a circle and Krister began serving the bread, placing it with care into each uplifted hand.

Michael and I stood at about the three-quarter mark in the circle, and I saw that the bread was fast disappearing. What will happen if there isn't enough for everyone, I wondered? Should I decline so that someone else can be served? Meanwhile, Krister calmly made his way toward us, showing no anxiety, and I received the bread in my hand because his demeanor and the words "given for you" somehow didn't allow for anything else.

I was vigilant as he proceeded to the remaining worshippers, his back toward me as he completed the circle. Then he turned toward the altar-- and there was bread left over on the paten! Enough, and more than enough! [E-mail from Susan Thomas splocherthomas@gmail.com Sat 7/14/2018 11:22 AM]

The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle story that is told by all four Gospel writers. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have the story of the feeding of the 5000. Matthew and Mark each additionally have a narrative of the feeding of the 4000.

With today's Gospel, we leave for a while the Gospel of Mark – which is the focus Gospel for Year B, the second of three lectionary cycles. For each of five weeks, we read a portion of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John. Today we have the feeding of the 5000; the next four weeks focus on Jesus' Discourse on the Bread of Life -- so I hope you like bread, because there's going to be a lot of it!

In today's Gospel story, Jesus goes up the mountain and sits down with the disciples. Looking up, Jesus sees a large crowd coming toward them. Unlike the stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there's no indication here in John that the people are hungry because they have been listening to teaching all day (or for three days as in one account). It's as if as soon as the crowd arrives, Jesus "puts on the coffee pot," as it were. It is only in John's Gospel that Jesus is the one who takes the initiative and asks the question about where to buy bread to feed the people. In response to the question, Philip does the calculations, considers the practical realities of the situation, and concludes that they can't afford it. Resources are just too scarce to solve this problem.

Kamille Skellick, in her blog post on *Grace Table*, speaks about living out of scarcity mode rather than abundant offering:

[She writes:] Do you ever feel this need to live life in scarcity mode rather than one of abundant offering? When I open up our fridge I begin rationing out the food out of fear that I will use up everything too quickly and be without. But what happens in my attempt to control and operate out of scarcity? Food spoils and goes rancid.

[<http://gracetable.org/living-abundance-not-scarcity/>, accessed 7/15/18]

Following upon Philip's response about the cost of buying enough food, the disciple Andrew now comes forward. In the words of podcasters Robb McCoy and Eric Fistler: "Andrew at least had an idea. It was an absurdly small idea, but he was creative enough to put it out there." [www.pulpitfiction.com/proper12b; accessed 7.24.2018] At which point, Andrew introduces the child with the five barley loaves and the two fish. The inclusion of the child with the lunch – unique to John's version of the story – has long been one of my favorite bits. Andrew then adds, "But what is this small

offering among so many people?" [John 6:9] Perhaps, though, no one has told the *child* that the barley bread and the fishes are not enough.

In reflecting on this text, commentator Brian Stoffregen shares a related story:

A few years ago, some friends were in a large city. They drove by a park that had numerous homeless people. Their young daughter, around 4 years old, at the time, asked about the people. Answered the mother: "They are homeless. They have no place to sleep. They have nothing to eat." "Well, why don't we feed them?" asked the daughter in all her innocence. "Why don't we feed them?"
<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x1.htm>, accessed 7/28/2018]

Once Andrew introduces the child, Jesus says, "Make the people sit down." So the people sit – all 5000 of them. Taking the loaves, Jesus gives thanks, and *then* distributes them to those who are seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. [John 6:11] Did you catch that? There "was a great deal of grass in the place." [John 6:10b] And did you also catch that Jesus distributes "as much as they *wanted*." The people eat and are *satisfied*. So satisfied, in fact, that there is a surplus from leftovers.

Brian Stoffregen notes:

How often have we stressed the difference between "wants" and "needs"? Here Jesus gives the people what they wanted! The amount of food goes beyond what they needed. In addition, [as mentioned earlier,] we are never told that the people were hungry or in need of food. It was Jesus who decided that they should eat (v. 5). . . . It's not about what the people want or need. It's about what Jesus wants to personally give.
 [Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at CrossMarks Christian Resources, John 6:1-21; Proper 12 – Year B. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john6x1.htm>, accessed 7.15.2018]

Also, John's version is the only one that specifies *barley* loaves. There are 36 individual references to barley in the Bible – from Exodus to Revelation. Barley is harvested earlier than wheat and is cheaper than wheat. Barley was used as food for animals, but barley *bread* was used chiefly among the poor. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the word for fish is *ἰχθύς* [*ichthus*]; in John, however, it is *οψαρίον* (*opsarion*). Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown notes: "*Opsarion* is a double diminutive of *opson* (cooked food eaten with bread); the meaning became more specifically 'fish,' especially 'dried or preserved fish.'" [Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According*

to *John (i - xii)*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, n. 9[c], p. 233] In other words, this is not fresh fish. The food offered by the child is thus a lunch that the poor might have eaten. But even so, with Jesus it is more than enough.

“Let no one despise your youth,” says the author of 1 Timothy. “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” [1 Timothy 4:12, NRSV] Let us not despise our youth – whether it is the child who in good faith offers a lunch to Jesus, or the contemporary 4-year-old who wants to feed the homeless. Let us not despise the youth of the four young people – August, Marc, Neil, and Tor, who, with Pastor Kari Jo, attended the recent ELCA Youth Gathering in Houston – and who will be sharing their witness with us in a few weeks. Let us not despise the youth of Kris Rude, a former Harvard Divinity School intern at UniLu, who, with faith and a vision, and with many invitations and much coalition building, was the impetus for UniLu’s offering sanctuary to Ana and her daughters Erika and Brianna.*

According to the text, it is Jesus who distributes the loaves (and also the fish). But, unless there is still another miracle at work here, the size of the crowd suggests that – in the words of scholar Raymond Brown, “this is a simplification and that the Synoptics [that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke] are correct in involving the disciples in the action.” [Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (i - xii)*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, n. 11[b], p. 234] – Which reminds me of a program emphasis the ELCA has every September that is called “God’s Work. Our Hands.” “God’s Work. Our Hands.” is scheduled this year for September 9th – and September 9th just happens to be the day for the Block Party, a day when we will be raising funds for the interfaith *meal packing* event in November.

I turn once again to Susan Thomas. At the end of her story, she adds:

Afterwards, we discussed what had happened with our friends Charlie and Barb, who also had noticed the scarcity of bread. “This is the sort of thing that gave rise to the feeding miracle stories,” Charlie, the schooled Harvard Divinity student, said.

[Susan asks:] But which came first, I wondered then, as I do still. The stories told about the feeding of the multitudes? Or the lived experience of being given more than enough even when things are scarce?

[She concludes:] Each must have fed the other.

But what are *your* stories? I invite you now to imagine that you are one of the characters in today's **feeding** story. But first: Who *are* the characters in today's story? //

++++ List on flipchart/ newsprint the characters as each one is named +++++

Now: With which character in the story do you most identify this morning? (That might change later today or tomorrow.)

- 1) *Are you Philip, the one who assesses the situation and calculates the costs of a project?*
- 2) *Are you Andrew, the one who identifies others' gifts and talents for ministry?*
- 3) *Are you the young child, offering what you have, though it might seem insignificant?*
- 4) *Are you a member of the crowd, a witness to, and recipient of, a miracle?*
- 5) *Are you one of the disciples that gathers up the leftovers so that nothing is lost?*
- 6) *Are you Jesus?*
- 7) *Are you the "great deal of grass"? Or the land?*

As you think about your character, try to imagine the setting. *What are you wondering about? What questions do you have? What is going through your head? What are you feeling? What do you notice? What do you want to have happen?*

I invite you now to take a few minutes to share your story with someone next to you. Please feel free to move as necessary. At the end of the few minutes, I'll ring the cymbals to gather us back together.

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After the 5000 are fed, they want to force Jesus to be their king. Perhaps they view Jesus as a kind of "divine vending machine" [www.pulpitfiction.com/proper12b; accessed 7.24.2018] but they may also sense that Jesus – in the words of one of our hymns – would be "a diff'rent kind of king". [Thomas Kelly, "O Christ, What Can It Mean for Us," *ELW* 431: end of stanzas 2, 3, & 4] Podcasters McCoy and Fistler point out that: "Bread was a way for kings to enforce their power. The distribution and withholding of bread is a way for those in power to keep their power" – something that is still happening. Witness the current debate over the Farm Bill; it is estimated that the House version of this "would knock around 1.2 million people off of SNAP [that is, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps]." [<https://www.motherjones.com/food/2018/07/paul-ryan-is-holding-the-farm-bill-hostage-over-food->

[stamps/](#) ; see also:

http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Farm_Bill_Introduction.pdf?_ga=2.259291658.1272683753.1532803238-1551911182.1492712070&_gac=1.217908514.1532614964.EAIAIQobChMItajnhfW83AIV0YCfCh0x0gnKEAAYASAAEgJbPPD_BwE, both accessed 7/28/2018]

What *are* we to do – what *can* we do when faced with so much need in our community and across the globe – need that seems to be, that *is*, growing more urgent every day? How effective are our efforts among so many emergencies? What do we do when attendance isn't what it used to be? “What are we among so many needy people?”

Writing in a recent issue of *Living Lutheran*, Pastor Nelson Rabell-González reflects:

If the mission is overwhelming and resources are scarce, we are told to use what is available. In this case the resources were a small amount of food – five barley loaves and two fish – from a small [child]. With faith and confidence in God, Jesus stretches the food to feed the crowd [and] even has leftovers!

[Rabell- González continues:] Sometimes less *is* better. In a time when church attendance and membership is declining, it may be that the future church won't have universities, fancy agencies or beautiful buildings. It may be that the future church has only five barley loaves and two fish. If that's all we have, we'll still be OK because we have Jesus – the “Great I am”; the one who is both our source of hope and our hope...; the one who is our heavenly bread. [Nelson Rabell- González, “Reflection: A savior who exceeds expectations,” *Living Lutheran*, July 2018, Volume 3, Number 4, p. 23]

Jesus says to us, “It is I [I AM]; do not be afraid.” [John 6:20] “I have come that you may have life and have life abundantly.” [John 10:10]

So now, when we leave this place, let us go forth unafraid and *live* - live abundantly, live voraciously, live freely, live hopefully, live in the trust that in our lives, when the strong winds blow and the waters becomes rough; when the sea seems so big and our boat so small [<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/o-god-thy-sea-so-great-my-boat-small-dk-matai/>]; and when we come across problems that seem too immense, we stop / and remember: Five barley loaves. Two fish. A multitude fed. And we remember the

love of God in Christ Jesus, who was, and who is, and who continues to be our source of sustenance now and forever. Amen.

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****Please note: The following section was omitted from the sermon, but it is included here in the event that anyone wants to reflect more generally on "The Importance of Unimportant People."***

The Interpreter's Bible from 1952 has a rather fanciful wondering about the child. In a section entitled "The Importance of Unimportant People," Arthur John Gossip speaks of the child:

One may suppose that he had begged his mother for permission to make a day of it; and that she had no doubt told him that he was too young to understand or to enjoy what he would find. But he had pestered her; as a boy will. Until in the end she had given him his way; and making up a little bundle of food, enough to see a boy through the day, had let him go. Perhaps, standing as near to the great man as he could get, he had overheard Christ's question and the subsequent dilemma, and had generously offered his little store to Andrew. In any case, is it not fairly certain that that night he burst into his home, with his eyes shining and his cheeks on fire, to tell them of the miracle that "I and Jesus" wrought! And his bold claim was true.

The author's wondering then turns to the mother:

One's thoughts, too, wander farther – to that mother who, as we would say, had made the sandwiches for her laddie; and who probably was not herself among the five thousand, but busy at home among her ordinary household tasks. These seem to us quite remote from Christ and his tremendous mission. And yet through one of them, put through in the bygoing among the rest, she all unconsciously gave Christ his chance, and helped him mightily.

[Arthur John Gossip, Exposition in *The Gospel According to St. John*, in *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume VIII – Luke, John*, p. 555]