

### John 6:1-15 (NRSV)

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. [2] A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. [3] Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. [4] Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. [5] When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" [6] He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. [7] Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." [8] One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, [9] "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" [10] Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. [11] Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. [12] When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." [13] So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. [14] When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

[15] When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

### THE FIVE THOUSAND IN JOHN

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle story told in all four gospels. But, John tells the story a little differently. In John's gospel it is Jesus who asks his disciples, "Where can we find bread for all these people? They're hungry." In Matthew, Mark and Luke it's the other way around. The disciples ask Jesus that question.

That small difference in John turns the story in quite a different direction. Instead of us going to Jesus and asking how we're going to feed the hungry, Jesus comes to us and asks, "So what are we going to do here? How are we going to take care of all these hungry people?"

Mother Teresa once said something like, “I know God won’t put more on me than I can take. I just wish he didn’t trust me so much!”

In John’s gospel we see that Jesus trusts his disciples to come up with answers. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t have the answer. In the end we always learn that Jesus is the answer. It’s just that through the process of solving the problem we come to understand more about Jesus and more about what Jesus has called us to do.

## PROBLEM SOLVING

I have been in many church meetings where the mood has been grim and tense. We have a problem. The roof is leaking. We are way under budget. Many of our members are sick. A church member has an overwhelming financial need. Some people are upset about a decision made by the hierarchy of our church. Some people are even upset with the pastor.

Of course we never have problems like this in *our* church, but in *some* churches problems like this arise. Actually, in all churches problems like this arise. We try our best to solve these problems. Almost immediately we begin to search for answers. We ask questions like, “What can we do? Where can we find what we need? What’s possible in this particular situation?”

It’s understandable that we approach problems in this way. Isn’t this how we deal with problems in our personal life? We try and figure out an answer or at least make the best compromise. Our goal is to make the problem go away as quickly as possible.

## LIVING WITH THE PROBLEM

But, maybe that’s not always the best thing we could do. Maybe sometimes we need to live with the problem a while in order to get the lesson that Jesus is teaching us. William Sloane Coffin in his book, “Credo” wrote,

“The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we don’t have the courage to live with uncertainty.” The uncertainty

brought about by a problem can sometimes be fertile ground for understanding the gospel in a new way.

A friend told of a taking a brief mission trip to Central America. They were overwhelmed by the tremendous problems of the area and immediately set about making plans to solve those problems.

Their hosts gently chided them for their hubris. They said, “This is so typical. You American Christians think that you solve every problem by organization. But, we have learned that there are some problems that are beyond our ability to solve, at least at the present time. We need help that comes from above as well as help that comes from below.”

According to John, Jesus brought this problem of hungry people to his disciples as a test; it was his way of helping them understand their own weakness in the face of need, and it was also a way of helping them understand the sufficiency of God’s power.

## A MIRACLE OF REVELATION

Feeding the 5,000 with only five loaves and two fish was more than a miracle of compassion. It was a revelation. It was a revelation about Jesus. Jesus was more than just a Messiah. He was God’s Son. He could do what only God could do.

There was a depth to this miracle that went beyond just feeding a large crowd on a particular day. This miracle was about bread from heaven, bread that satisfied a hunger that even the blue plate special can’t touch.

I wonder. How many of the problems that come our way are given to us by Jesus? How many problems are a test that helps us appreciate the power and promises of God?

## COUNTING THE COST

Most of us don’t look at problems in this way. We want to resolve the dilemma as quickly as possible. Out of anxiety we often offer solutions that are not helpful. That’s what happened in our lesson for today.

Jesus asked Philip,  
“How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?”

And immediately Philip thought about money. He said,

“Let’s see. That’s a half sandwich per person at market price times 5,000. Hold on Lord. I’ve almost got it. Carry the two ... equals a grand total of ... oh my goodness. We can’t afford this. It would cost the equivalent of six months wages just to feed these people a meager meal!”

Whenever a new ministry is proposed in a church Philip is always present with his calculator handy. “Do you know how much this is going to cost? We can’t afford to take on this project.”

That’s why one successful pastor said that he won’t allow any talk about how a project is to be financed until the committee first answers this question: Is God calling us to do this ministry? He’s found that if they answer the first question in the affirmative, a way is found to take care of the financial need.

It’s important to note that Jesus didn’t criticize Philip. We need people like Philip. They are the realists. They remind us that there is no such thing as a free lunch. In fact, as we see in this story, lunch can be quite expensive. Ministry, like everything else, comes with a price tag.

## THE APPEAL TO SHARE

In our story for today Philip’s realistic assessment is taken into consideration by Andrew. Andrew says, “Perhaps we don’t have to take the money out of our regular budget. We know there’s not much money there. Maybe we need a special appeal to round up what we need. Those who have a lot can share with those who don’t have much.”

Again, we need people like Andrew too. He’s pragmatic and figures out a way to get things done. We put people like Andrew in charge of our stewardship campaign.

But, what happens when we spend a great deal of time and energy on our stewardship campaign, and there are even fewer pledges than the year before? What happens we find out that everyone in the crowd is on a fixed income?

That's what happened when Andrew went looking for resources in the crowd. The only one who has any food is a little boy. And he doesn't have that much ... five rolls and two sardines. It is barely enough for his lunch. And it certainly isn't enough to share."

Andrew is discouraged by this. He asks, "With so much hunger, what are five loaves and two small fish?"

And Andrew's comment is apropos in today's world. In many places the problem of hunger has gotten worse instead of better. A recent scientific study suggested that there is "... little hope of providing adequate food for the majority of humanity by the year 2050."

The needs are so great, and the resources are so small. In some third world countries it would take almost 40 years for a family to make the equivalent of our poverty level income for a year.

When we look at the problem from a global perspective, Andrew is right. There's not that much to go around. How can we feed people on such meager rations?

It is good to try and help as best we can. Someone once said that "man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn't live very long without it either." The concerns of Philip and Andrew are important. We should be good stewards of what God has given us. We should make careful budgets and encourage generosity among our people.

## A TEST OF FAITH

But, seeking bread for the world goes beyond practical considerations. It is also a spiritual matter. It is a test of our faith. Can we trust God to provide what we need? Can we pray as our Lord taught us, "Give us this day our daily bread" and then trust him to do just that?

In order to do that we have to take what we have and give it to Jesus. And in the hands of Jesus we will find that what we have, when it is shared, is enough. That's our story for today. And it's a very important story. That's why this story is told in all the gospels. It's not just about a miracle that occurred long ago. It's a miracle that can occur today as well.

In the hands of Jesus the most meager rations are still enough to make a significant difference. Indeed, where once there was a shortage, there can be abundance.

The Bible tells us that not only were they able to feed 5,000 people with only five small loaves and two fish, everyone had all they wanted and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. It almost sounds like one of our church suppers!

And maybe it was. Food shared in love becomes a sacrament; bread from heaven is food for the soul as well as food for the body.

I love the advertisement that the Episcopalians have placed in the newspaper. It shows a picture of a communion cup and the caption reads, "What other meal can sustain you for a week?"

## BREAD OF HEAVEN

But, then as now, people had a hard time understanding the significance of the meal they ate. If one free lunch was good, then two free lunches would be even better. The crowd decided that they would make Jesus their king, by force if necessary.

I guess the idea of "a chicken in every pot" has always been a good political slogan. In John 6:15 we read that Jesus knew that they planned to make him king by force so he withdrew from the crowd.

The crowd couldn't receive everything that Jesus had to offer because their focus was too narrow. They were only worried about the next meal.

Jesus spelled it out for the crowds later on. In John 6:26-27 we read that Jesus told them that there was more to life than just a free meal. They had a hunger in their soul that only bread from heaven could satisfy. And Jesus was

the bread of heaven. Jesus was the one who could give them what they truly needed.

The crowd came to Jesus asking, “What’s in it for me? Where’s the beef?” Or in this case they were asking, “Where’s the bread?” But, they could never really understand Jesus by asking that question. In fact the Bible tells us that when the bread stopped coming many of the people quit following. (John 6:60, 66)

## WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

Many people in our age are also asking, “What’s in it for me?” But, that’s the wrong question when it comes to following Christ. The question is not “What do I want?”

The question is “What does God want?”

What problem does God want us to tackle? What do we have that we need to share as a sign of that coming kingdom, a kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain? Is there a tear that we need to wipe from a cheek? Is there a word of encouragement that we need to offer?

Ironically, we can only find Jesus when we dare to do something for others in his name. If we seek him and his blessings too directly they will always elude us.

William Sloane Coffin once said that he did not understand how you can attract people to the Gospel by appealing to their essentially selfish needs and then end up offering them the unselfish Gospel of Jesus. One of two things will invariably happen. People will reject Jesus or they will change Jesus into the kind of Savior that they want instead of the kind of Savior he really is.

P.T. Forsyth wrote at the turn of the century,  
“There are few dangers threatening the religious future more serious than the slow shallowing of the religious mind ... Divine things are no more than a comfort. And, if so, it means much for the future of religion, and much of it is ominous. And the poverty of our worship amid its very refinements, its lack of solemnity ... is the fatal index of the peril.”

It's hard to follow Jesus. In fact, when people get to know him, many quit following. There are other religions that better meet their needs.

But, there is no other way to find the heart of God than in the unselfish compassion of the man Jesus. We feed not only upon bread but upon the bread of life.

In Jesus we find our true destiny.

In Jesus we find a meal that will sustain us in the wilderness.

In Jesus we receive manna from heaven.

## A CHURCH IN NAIROBI

A pastor from a church in Nairobi told of three tired young men who came to her office one day. They were refugees from the killing in Rwanda. They left with only the clothes they had on their back.

The first thing they asked when they came into her office was ask if they could sing Amazing Grace. The pastor said that their rendition was so beautiful that it sounded like "angel music." They explained that they had seen so much killing and violence in their home country that they could not find the words to pray. So, instead, as they walked, they sang. They sang Amazing Grace and that song became God's assurance in the wilderness.

The young men wanted some assistance. They had found a room to rent for \$8.00 a month. For \$12.00 a month they could buy enough food to sustain them until they could get situated.

The pastor asked the young men to come back after she talked with her church leaders. She said that they all agreed it was a great ministry. But, someone talked about the budget. Someone said that \$8.00 was not a lot of money but if you multiplied by 12 months, the next thing you know it would be impossible.

Someone else suggested a very Andrew like idea. They said, "Let's have a special offering. Let's tell the congregation about the situation, have these young men sing one Sunday morning and whoever in the congregation is willing to help could donate above and beyond their usual tithes."

The church leaders talked late into the night. Some were worried. There were so many refugees in the city. If the word spread that their church was involved in paying rent and buying groceries they would be swamped with needy people.

So those church leaders made a very different decision that night, a very practical decision. The church would from that day forward be a “spiritual” institution only. There would be no more picnics, no more church suppers and no more giving assistance to refugees. They just didn’t have the resources to do otherwise.

The pastor said, “As I listened to my church leaders, I learned so much about the myth of limited resources. We often think that there’s just enough for some of us, that some of us have to go without. We’re worried that we’ll run out. But, guess what? God’s world has enough for all of us.”

The question is not “Do we have enough to go around?” I believe our Lord will give us what we need in even the most difficult situation. The question is do we have the faith to trust His provision?

## THE CITY BEAUTIFUL?

This past week the city of Orlando decided that it wasn’t a good idea to feed homeless people in their beautiful park ... so they outlawed it. One commissioner, a person who works with the homeless on behalf of a Christian organization voted against it.

But, most of the rest went along. It was a practical matter. It was bad for business. It wasn’t the kind of thing you want in the “city beautiful.”

This week Orlando’s decision also made it to the Tonight Show. As you might imagine the comedian, Jay Leno was making fun of a city that would actually ban feeding the homeless. What seemed like a good idea at the time had become a cheap joke.

But, hunger is not a laughing matter ... not physical hunger nor spiritual hunger. And the two are related. Perhaps that’s why some religious

traditions have always encouraged the practice of fasting. That gnawing sensation in the pit of their stomach reminded them of the hunger in their soul for something greater.

## BRING YOUR DROP IN THE BUCKET TO JESUS

Friends, today Jesus asks us a question as he asked his disciples long ago. He asks us, “What are you going to do with all these hungry people?” There are some that are physically hungry, and there are many more that are spiritually hungry ... hoarding resources and not helping others because they cannot recognize the empty spot in their soul.

Both hungers need to be fed. And the need seems to be getting greater instead of less. If we look at it realistically, we would be prone to despair. Like those first disciples we want to say, “Lord, you want me to do what? I can’t feed everyone. I can’t fight city hall. I’m only one person and my resources are meager”

But, Jesus tells us, “Just give me what you have, and it will be enough.” I think I may have mentioned this before. When some of our church members went to Mississippi to help clean up after hurricane Katrina, the devastation was overwhelming. Some wanted to give up. One person said, “What we’re doing is just a drop in the bucket.”

But, another young man, a youth director in one of our churches replied, “Yes, it’s just a drop in the bucket. But, it’s our drop.”

Jesus tells us, “Bring your drop to the bucket.”

What is possible? Not much when I consider my faithless ways and meager resources. But, when I bring what I have to Jesus, the possibilities are endless.

Friends, bring your drop to the bucket and trust God to provide the rest.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**