

PENTECOST 9A ('17):
Not Everything, But Everything We Need
(Matthew 14:13-21)

Some years ago – more than I care to admit actually! – when my wife Jeanette was a senior at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, and I was in my second year at Trinity Lutheran Seminary just across the street, she and some of my friends from seminary would, occasionally, wait on tables at banquets that were catered by a local business called Ray's Fish Market. On one such occasion, they were catering a rather large and prestigious affair, a fund-raiser I believe, at the Ohio Historical Society, also there in Columbus, for about a thousand people.

On the menu that night, again for this very fancy event, was a choice between prime rib and chicken, with baked potatoes and asparagus or steamed broccoli. There were, as I say, close to a thousand people in attendance, which meant that by the time the final tables were being served, those who been served *first* were just about finished eating their meals, and *these* tables were already being cleared off. Now, as it turns out, this was very fortunate for the caterer. Because he... or *she*... had apparently miscalculated, and hadn't prepared *enough* prime rib or chicken.

Of course, it was too late to go back and cook up some more. At this point there just wasn't enough time. Instead, they somehow had to manage and make-do with what they *had*. Neither could they serve the remaining guests just baked potatoes and vegetables either; not for a high society fundraiser such as this. Nor could they even *think about* sending them away hungry. After all, the whole point of the evening was to feed them well, and show them a good time, so that they would then open up their wallets and checkbooks, and contribute generously to the Ohio Historical Society.

So the obvious question then was this: How are we going to *feed* all these people? How are we going to *stretch* a limited amount of food among so many?

...That's the same problem they had in today's Gospel, isn't it? Jesus had just heard about the death – the execution really – of his cousin, John the Baptist, and has gone off by himself in a boat. But the crowds, however, have followed him out of town on foot. And upon seeing them, we are told, Jesus made his way to shore. As much as he wanted and *needed* to be alone, in order to grieve for his cousin, he nevertheless had compassion on the crowds and cured their sick.

But by now, however, it was getting late and the people were naturally getting hungry. The disciples notice this, but they also recognize that they were off in the middle of nowhere as well. So they go to Jesus and suggest that he now dismiss the crowds, and send them away, so the people can go back to the nearby villages in order to *purchase* some food for themselves. A perfectly reasonable solution to an obvious dilemma, right?

But, as we heard, Jesus disagrees. “They need not go away,” he says to the disciples, rather “*you* give them something to eat.” In other words, we already have *everything* we need right here; even out here in the wilderness.

However, they reply, “We have *nothing*...” In other words, Jesus is telling them that they have everything they need, but yet from *their* perspective they believe, instead, that they have *nothing*. “Nothing here but five loaves and two fish,” they say. And Jesus simply says that's enough, “Bring them here to me.”

Now two very significant things happen at this point. For one, Jesus tells the people to take a seat. I can picture them milling around, stomachs growling, shifting impatiently from one foot to

the other, wondering, and perhaps murmuring amongst themselves over just what was going to happen next. What's the deal? Are we *going* or are we *staying*?

We also know from our passage that there were also women and children in these crowds, in addition to some five thousand men. So I imagine there were more than a few crying babies at this point, and undoubtedly some flustered mothers as well. But Jesus' command to take a seat in the grass confirms that they'll be *staying* – which logically implies that they'll also be staying for *supper* as well...

The second significant thing here is what Jesus does next. He takes the five loaves and two fish, and, looking up into heaven, he blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples; who, in turn, gave them to the crowds to eat.

Now the parallels and symbolism here are unmistakable, of course. For instance, our first lesson from Isaiah *also* speaks of an abundance of food and drink, even for those who cannot afford to buy it. We're also reminded of the manna in the wilderness, when God fed the Israelites who had escaped from slavery in Egypt. Moreover, the event described in this morning's gospel is also reminiscent of the feeding stories associated with Elijah and Elisha in 1st and 2nd Kings, respectively. But, *most* of all, Jesus' actions and words remind us of the Lord's Supper, and, I'm sure, intentionally so.

In fact, I'm absolutely certain that the gospel writer employed *all* of these images and parallels, and all of this symbolism to connect *this* story to some of these other great moments in scripture, and also, perhaps, to remind us that there is no difference, no distinction, between the secular and the sacred when it comes to the life of faith and God's activity in the world. Rather, each and

every moment can be seen, and experienced, as a “holy” moment and a moment of grace.

So what happened next? I guess I should *first* tell you what happened to Jeanette and my seminary buddies when they faced a similar situation some years ago. Remember, they were catering this big, fancy fund-raiser for a thousand people when they suddenly realized that they were out of prime rib and chicken. So the obvious question was: How are we going to feed all the remaining people?

Well, do you *also* remember my saying that the crowd that evening was so large that just as they were getting around to serving the *last* of the guests, others working for the caterer were simultaneously clearing off the tables of those who had been the *first* to be served? And part of that included, of course, leftovers; that is, the *uneaten* food remaining on the plates, especially the *leftover* prime rib and chicken...

Now, perhaps, you can see where I’m going with this? I warn you, it isn’t pretty.

Panicking, because there wasn’t enough food to go around, the caterer – again he *or* she – made a surprising (and fateful) decision; that is, to scrape off the remaining portions of meat and chicken from the plates of those who were already *finished* eating (when those plates came back to the kitchen) and then *place* these leftovers on the *clean* plates that were now being prepared for those still waiting to be served! (I told you it wasn’t pretty!)

Disgusting, I know! Right? Jeanette says that they were *so* desperate that they even resorted to dusting or scraping cigarette ashes off some of the portions of uneaten food, just so they would have something to serve those who hadn’t eaten yet. And

unbelievably – *miraculously* even – no one was ever the wiser... apparently.

Well, that's certainly *one* way of stretching out some food – using leftovers. But that doesn't seem to have happened in our lesson this morning. As we heard, the leftovers were only collected *after* everyone had eaten and was full.

So what *did* happen out there in the wilderness? Well, there are at least three possibilities, aren't there? Some would say that Jesus' words and actions, which are nearly identical to the consecration of the elements in Holy Communion, mean that this was, in fact, a sharing of the Eucharist. But that's putting "the cart before the horse," wouldn't you say? After all, the Last Supper hasn't even taken place yet. Nor had the crucifixion.

Now, to be sure, the gospel writer clearly had the Lord's Supper *in mind*, and intentionally drew obvious connections to it, when he wrote about this event. But that's not what this moment in the wilderness was all about...

Another interpretation – and a common one, for sure – is that there was a miraculous *multiplication* of the loaves and fish; great enough, in fact, not only to feed everyone there, but to account for all the leftovers as well. And those who espouse *this* interpretation often look for similar miracles in their own lives. God will take care of it, they say. God will somehow take care of everything.

But if you go back and reread the lesson, you'll see that there's absolutely *no mention* of a miraculous "multiplication" of food; none whatsoever. Not even a hint. That's merely a conclusion that *we* have drawn. It simply says that everyone was fed.

Moreover, Barbara Brown Taylor (one of the more well-known and well-respected preachers of our day) has a problem with

miracles that “mesmerize” us, as she puts it, and lead us to leave everything up to God. “Miracles,” she writes, “let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all.” Instead, what God is telling us here, says Brown, is, “Not me but *you*; not my bread but *yours*; not sometime or someone else but right here and now... Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and *participate* in one instead,” says Brown.

I had a former parishioner who was forever talking about everything she could and would do for the church *if...* she ever won the lottery, that is. And as I listened to her, I would sometimes think to myself: Is she doing everything she can *right now* with what she *already has*?

But there’s a third possibility, isn’t there? Mother Teresa once spoke of a just such a moment. “One night,” she wrote, “a man came to our house to tell me that a Hindu family, a family of eight children, had not eaten anything for days. They had nothing to eat. I took enough rice for a meal and went to their house. I could see the hungry faces, the children with their bulging eyes... The mother took the rice from my hands, divided it in half and went out. When she came back a little later, I asked her, ‘Where did you go? What did you do?’

“She answered, ‘They are also hungry.’ *They* were the people next door, a Muslim family with the same number of children to feed and who did not have any food either. That mother was aware of the situation. She had the courage and the love to share her meager portion of rice with others. In spite of her circumstances, I think she felt very happy to share with her neighbors the little I had taken her.”

Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that she once heard a Dutch priest tell a very similar story. He recalled a time at the end of the Second World War, she writes, “when his father, ‘thin as a rail,’ had gone off into the countryside to search for food for the family and finally returned with many pounds of meat, peas, and potatoes. His mother took the food, and before *anyone* could say *anything*, put aside part of it for hungry neighbors. ‘If you don’t share with others, you die,’ she said.”

Consequently, Ruether also has her *own* interpretation of what happened in today’s Gospel. “... the reason why there was so much food (left over),” she writes, “was that all the women, as women are wont to do, brought picnic baskets, food enough for themselves, their children and one or two neighbors. *So of course* there was more than enough for all. But since the women and children were not counted (she cleverly reminds us), the gospel writer did not know where the food came from and presumed it was a miracle performed by Jesus... There were actually many more baskets than the 12 taken up by the disciples of Jesus,” she speculates. “The *other* baskets were taken back by the women to feed those left at home. This is the *real* miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes,” she concludes.

The disciples, remember, were convinced that they had “nothing.” But, as Jesus proved, God can even take our “nothing” and use it to do his gracious will. Our “nothing” in God’s hands is “something.” Indeed, it’s “more than enough.” It may not be “*everything*.” But it’s, nevertheless, everything we need...

Now what do *I* think happened out there with the crowds in the wilderness? I think that, as Jesus blessed that tiny amount of food, the crowds realized that the kingdom of heaven was all about *giving*, not *receiving*. And, as Larry Patten writes, “The first church potluck was unleashed.”

This is not some sort of prosperity gospel, folks! Jesus didn't miraculously produce a gourmet, seven-course meal. It was bread and fish, and whatever else the people had brought with them that day. And it wasn't like the old Oprah Winfrey show either. Jesus didn't hand out sheep and goats to all his guests who came to hear him speak! He simply inspired and organized the passing out of whatever food they had on hand at that moment; nothing more special than that... But, then again, it *was* pretty special, wasn't it? Miraculous, even.

The lesson of today's Gospel, of course, is one that we've all probably heard before: God will provide. And I truly believe that. But I also believe that part of *how* God provides is by teaching us to distinguish between what we *want* and what we truly *need*. God is all about what we need... but not so keen on what we want. In other words, we may not be able to have *everything* in this life, but we have everything we need.

There's always enough – not that the supply is *unlimited*, however, or that God will always miraculously multiply our resources. There's a distinct difference here between the two. It's the difference, again, between having “everything,” on the one hand – which is impossible – and having “everything we need,” on the other hand – which is *actually* what God promises...

A good example, I think, is our current situation here at Hope. Back in the '70's when I left Freehold, as they say, to find fame and fortune (and ultimately found *neither*, by the way!) there were two viable, if not vibrant, Lutheran churches in town – Grace and Hope.

But the years *since then* have not been kind to either congregation, have they? Just as they have not been kind to the vast majority of Lutheran and mainline congregations throughout the U.S.

If memory serves me correctly, Hope's membership is only a fraction today of what it once was. And, sadly, Grace ultimately had to close its doors.

Yet look at what happened; at what you managed to accomplish together. You took what you *had*, even though it may have been far less than it once was, and you pooled those resources together. Yes, Grace had to close its doors. But, in so doing, it was actually able to generously gift the synod and its various ministries. And not only *that!* But the remnant that was once Grace Lutheran Church *also* gifted Hope with both themselves and also *additional* financial resources – including a parsonage (Thank you very much!) – in order to embark upon this brand new, and exciting, chapter in the story of the Lutheran presence here in the Freehold area.

Had the two congregations remained apart, separated, that Lutheran presence might have eventually disappeared altogether. Grace, as noted, actually had to *close* its doors. But Hope was not without its own problems and challenges. I've looked at the numbers, and Hope had also been in decline for a number of years.

But, again, look at what happened! You took what you had, your five loaves and two fish so to speak, and you've done something wonderful. Just as Jesus told the disciples *not* to send the crowds away in search of food, but rather encouraged the people themselves to share what they had with each other – whatever it might have been, however small it might have seemed to them at the time – that same Lord has inspired all of you to share what *you* have with each other and, in so doing, to remain – *together* – a viable gospel presence in this community...

According to today's Gospel, our "nothing" is "something." Even more than that, it's enough. It's enough to do everything God *wants* us to do, at this time in our congregation's life. Perhaps in

the future, if we have more, God will *ask* us to do more. But for *now*, what we have is enough.

“This story,” writes Trygve Johnson, the chaplain of Hope College in Holland, Michigan (referring to today’s Gospel), “reminds me that sometimes Jesus is simply asking me to give my *nothing* – my little loaves and fishes – and then to stand back and watch... The God of Jesus knows no limitation... The economy of the kingdom of God is abundant and knows no scarcity. My fridge doesn’t have to be *full* for Jesus to take what I have and feed others,” he says.

I truly believe that God has blessed each one of us and, moreover, that God has blessed this congregation in ways we sometimes can’t even see, and also far beyond where our imaginations dare to dream. All we have to do is to share our loaves and fishes... and then stand back and watch what God is able to do with them!

Amen.