

“God’s Abundance,” 9 Pentecost, FPC Marshfield, Aug. 6,

2017. Texts: Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

In the story just before our reading from Matthew, John the Baptist was beheaded at Herod’s birthday party at the behest of Herodias, his wife, and her daughter. Jesus went away to a deserted place because he needed to mourn the loss of John. For him John’s death was undoubtedly a sign of what was to come, when he, too, would die. Possibly the crowds were also upset about John’s death. So when Jesus sought solitude, the people followed him. He put their needs ahead of his own and offered compassion and healing.

Then the hour became late. The disciples encouraged Jesus to send the crowd away, so that they could go to nearby villages to buy food. Jesus said, quite bluntly, “They need not go away. You give them something to eat. The disciples had nothing but five loaves, probably barley bread, and two fish. This is a lunch of the poor. Jesus invited the crowds to sit down on the grass. He blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to distribute, just as we will do shortly when we share in communion.

This story appears in all four gospels, and Matthew and Mark also have a feeding of 4,000. If these numbers are accurate, there may have been 10,000 people, counting men, women, and children, again a sign of the heavenly banquet.

Since we are children of the Enlightenment, we always want to know, “Did this really happen?” The explanation often given is that the people were so moved by Jesus’ generosity that they got out what they had brought along and shared it with others. The other explanation is that it was spiritual food and people were satisfied with only a miniscule portion. I would suggest that we should not spend so much time on whether this or any other so-called “miracle” is historical or not. We need rather to concentrate on its theological and metaphorical meaning. First, the story illustrates God’s abundance. God intends for all to be fed, not a sumptuous banquet, but the basic necessities. As I have said before, God’s justice is not the kind we think of when we talk about the criminal justice system; it is not retributive justice, but distributive justice. God calls us to see that the basic needs of all people are met. The Roman society of Jesus’ time and all principalities and powers, all domination systems, tend

to accumulate power at the top and those at the bottom of the pyramid often do not have enough to maintain life. A good example of that in our time is the existence of famine in lands caught up in war. Children are dying every day in South Sudan, in Yemen, in Syria, and in other places where violence keeps service providers from feeding the hungry. It has long been the church's call to support agencies that provide emergency aid. Yet in so many war torn lands, combatants do not want their enemies to be fed. They even attack aid workers. This is an example of the injustice of the world, not the justice of a loving God.

The church has a long history of answering the call of Jesus to serve the most vulnerable. We in this church have a long history of supporting the Soup or Socks food pantry, even offering it a home in our building. We have long supported the CROP Walk, which funds the work of Church World Service as it addresses emergency needs around the world as well as our local needs. In recent years, we have also supported the Empty Bowls project, which provides a simple meal for a donation to assist the work of Soup or Socks. Our youth pack meals for the Nutrition on Weekends program for children

who are food insecure at home. The VBS offering for this year is for nutritious snacks to be used in the NOW program.

The book group read a story by Sara Miles, Take This Bread. After not having been involved in church for a long time, Sara visited St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco. It is a very welcoming church, including all kinds of people. She was especially moved about being invited to communion, even though she had not been baptized. She became very active in the church and she founded several food pantries in San Francisco. When the pantry is open, food is laid out on the communion table to make the connection between the eucharist and the food that we eat every day, as well as that we provide for those in need. Many people have come off the street, helped with the food pantry, and eventually become part of the church. I attended that church in the late 1980s for their Easter Vigil. After the service, including lighting the new fire, readings from the Old Testament that relate to water symbolism, baptismal renewal, and the Eucharist, they served a simple feast right on the communion table.

So the feeding of the multitudes is a sign of God's abundance, intended for all God's people. It is also likely a story of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper. Meal sharing probably started in the church shortly after Jesus' death. Paul's references to it in 1 Corinthians 10-11 date from the early 50s, and he indicates that it is older than that. We have often thought of the Lord's Supper as the Last Supper. It is the model provided for us on Maundy Thursday, when we observe Jesus' institution of the supper. For many years, churches of the Reformed tradition only celebrated the meal four times a year or less. But the ecumenical movement and liturgical reform following Vatican II in the Roman Catholic church has increased our frequency of celebration. Now, most Presbyterian churches celebrate communion once a month plus on important liturgical festivals, as we do. There are a few Presbyterian churches, for example, West Plano Presbyterian Church in Texas, that celebrate it weekly. That is really what our liturgical resources recommend.

Also, there are other models of the Eucharist besides the Last Supper. [The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry](#) document published by the World Council of Churches in 1982

suggests several scriptural stories that are Eucharistic in nature. The Last Supper connects the meal with Jesus' death. Perhaps our story for today, connecting the feeding with the death of John the Baptizer, also suggests that connection. The Last Supper, in the Synoptic gospels, is a Passover meal, which has a close connection to our Holy Week and Easter celebration. Just as the Israelites were liberated from slavery in Egypt, Jesus was liberated from death at Easter. The provision of manna in the desert and the meal of the New Covenant in Exodus 24 are a similar signs.

The feeding of the multitudes is also a sign of God's Kingdom, where all will be fed. Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners during his earthly life is yet another. The meals after Jesus' resurrection, such as his breakfast on the beach in John 21 and his meal with the disciples after the encounter on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 are also signs. The Eucharist is a "foretaste of the feast to come," an anticipation of the Supper of the Lamb or the heavenly banquet. All these stories provide models for Holy Communion.

The feeding story is also a sign that no offering is too small for God to use it. The five loaves and two fish were enough for Jesus to work with. I think that people should understand that their offering to the church does not have to be more than they can afford. Jesus told the story of the woman who gave to the temple her smallest coin and that was enough for God to use. Presbyterian Women have an offering called "The Least Coin." People usually put in pennies or nickels for this, but when it is collected worldwide it amounts to quite a bit of support for mission. It is used in poorer countries of the world for that very reason, to let everyone have a part.

The last week in July I attended Synod School at the Presbyterian Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, IA. The keynote speaker was our new stated clerk of the General Assembly, J. Herbert Nelson. He is black, a third generation Presbyterian pastor. He said that the church needs a new Reformation. He acknowledged that the church has been losing members for the last forty years, and that it is especially difficult to keep young people involved in church. But he said we should not give up. For example, he said that many young

people take part in the Young Adult Volunteer programs of the church. These are short term mission projects in the U.S. and around the world. These people come back on fire with new ideas and the church needs to be open to what they bring. The church needs to be involved with the problems of the world and the need for justice, for that distributive justice that I described previously. Evangelism and justice are closely related. We have often separated them. We need to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ even as we seek to address the problems of our society.

Nelson was at the Presbyterian U.N. office and then at the Washington Office before being called to the Stated Clerk position. Before that he was a pastor in North Carolina and Memphis, Tennessee. At an evening session he said that Memphis is exceptionally caught up in racism and poverty. It has even been called the capital of Northwest Mississippi. He said it was no wonder that Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated there. He had come to work with the garbage collectors to address the dangerous working conditions and lack of decent wages for their work. To this day, gun violence is a big issue there and all over the country. We cannot avoid

issues of justice even when they are political. In spite of decline, there is hope for the church and we must not give up.

He also said that we need ministry in inner cities and rural areas, in spite of the difficulties in finding the resources to keep churches functioning in those places. We have also lost some of the larger and wealthier churches who have left the denomination. Still we must go on, finding new ways to do ministry.

God offers abundance, as exemplified by the feeding of the multitude. God offers hope, even as Jacob wrestled with the unknown figure in the night and prevailed, even though he was left with a dislocated hip. God is with us in all things.