

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21
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Some of you who have been in Bible Study classes with me for a while know that the feeding miracles and the walking on water stories are probably the most difficult for me to accept at face value. This morning in John's gospel, they are found together side by side. Jesus is testing my faith. But perhaps my own skepticism comes from other New Testament texts.

In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, directly after his baptism, are made explicit. In the first, he is tempted to turn stones into bread. This is a temptation to miraculously feed people without the time and effort of growing, harvesting, kneading and baking. Stones were plentiful whereas food was scarce. Jesus could feed a hungry nation and world if he succumbed to this temptation. His response to Satan was, you'll remember, "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In other words, life is more than just satisfying our bellies.

It seems to me that when Jesus feeds the five thousand here and the four thousand elsewhere, he is violating the temptation he resisted in theory after his baptism. Many scholars and theologians, who know much more than I, would disagree. You may, too.

John's version of the feeding miracle is different in some interesting ways from the same stories told in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the first place, John alone tells us about a boy who comes forward with the loaves and fish. "But what are these among so many?" Andrew asks.

Those of us in local helping professions are often like Philip and Andrew – overwhelmed by the need everywhere and especially here in Petersburg. Six months' wages couldn't begin to feed all these people even one meal. I received calls from two homeless couples last week needing food and shelter. A bit exasperated, I asked them why they came to Petersburg of all places. I told them that the needs here were greater than in any of the surrounding areas. Every church, every city resource, every shelter is stretched to the limit. I did help one couple a little, but it felt like just a drop in the bucket.

Philip and Andrew perceive that their situation is hopeless and the small offering of five loaves and two fish is just a drop in the bucket as well. Jesus, however, we are told, already knows what he will do. Maybe the presence of the boy confirms and strengthens his resolve.

I've been reading a book by Robert Lupton called Toxic Charity. A parishioner gave it to me. As the title implies, the book suggests that in some cases continued giving without asking for

something in return may be more harmful than good for the recipients. It is an enlightening read for sure.

In one section, the author talks about a development strategy called “asset-based community development.” Simply, it recommends assessing a declining community’s condition and developing a plan to revitalize its members not by looking at what that community lacks, but rather by identifying the community’s strengths or assets. In this way, the community members themselves concentrate on their existing healthy capacities to begin to figure out ways to build upon the positive aspects they already possess and overcome problems. Of course, they will eventually need additional resources from other sources to reach optimal social and economic viability.

Thinking about our story today then, the boy comes forward with what we might call some community assets, however minimal – five loaves and two fish. Jesus, the facilitator and visionary, makes the people sit down on the grass reminding them of Psalm 23:2: “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” They relax and anticipate something good about to happen. Jesus takes the small offering and thanks God for it. He says a table blessing in preparation for a meal. Then there is another detail different from the other gospels. We are told that he, Jesus – not the disciples – begins to pass out the food. Jesus himself is demonstrating hospitality and building upon the generosity of the boy. In the end, all are fed with more than enough and there is a surplus for the disciples.

Is it possible that the example of the boy and Jesus’ faith in the rest by saying the blessing and passing out the little bit caused them to self-identify the assets they had withheld up until then? Human nature is such that when we believe assets are scarce, we tend to hide and hoard them for ourselves.

Is the miracle and message here that we have a God of Abundance, and all will have more than enough when we look to Jesus and open our hearts and pockets to one another? On this day, this particular community thrived because one boy first showed great faith in Jesus’ ability to turn a little into more. I’m reminded of Jesus telling us of mustard seed size faith and our need to have the faith of a child.

Some of our lay shepherds send out small cards with kind handwritten notes to our older members, shut-ins and those in the hospital. I am always hearing how much those little cards mean to the recipients.

We wonder every time we have a “celebration of life” reception whether we’ll get enough food and help to provide for the family and their friends after a funeral service. Each time, however, enough of you give a little of your time or your special finger foods, and we end up with more

than enough. A grieving family receives the comforting and healing gift of Christ and Grace's hospitality and generosity.

To date, Martha Merritt's food pantry has received nine deliveries of vegetables from that little patch of land we are using for our Community Garden.

The sea of need is indeed great. You and I can't possibly satisfy every hungry and hurting soul. I am glad that Jesus has churches and communities of faith spread out everywhere around the world. We here can do some of the work by following the example of that young boy and having enough faith in Jesus to offer our gifts, no matter how meager, over and over again.

The feeding story in John's gospel ends with another unique detail. After all are fed with plenty, the people want to take Jesus by force and make him king. If they had all fed themselves with the food they had originally kept stashed, one wonders if they would have perceived it as a great enough miracle to elevate Jesus to be their supreme leader. Only a few former prophets like Elijah and Elisha had done similar, albeit smaller scale, miracles of feeding people with scant food reserves.

If Jesus had accepted the position as king of Israel, he would have severely limited his mission to establish an everlasting kingdom both here and beyond time and space. Furthermore, he would have acquiesced to Satan's third temptation to accept worldly power, and he would have then been a legitimate threat to Roman authority and been executed for justifiable treason.

But that's not the point of the story. The point, as I see it, is this: The miracle will happen again and again when we voluntarily assume the role of the little boy – when we step up and offer our equivalent of five loaves and two fish.

Think about a time when you have had that opportunity in your life. What did you do? When the opportunity arises again, will you be the one to step forward? Will you be the one to set the miracle in motion? AMEN.

