

lec 17B, July 28, 2024

Psalm 145:10-19, 2 Kings 4:42-44, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

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Today, we hear two miracle stories. In each of them, a small amount of food is multiplied to feed a crowd. Both raise that provocative question—how much is enough? In both stories, that anxious question is overturned. For in the end, these are not stories about the scarcity of food, but about the abundance of God.

Both of these stories begin with a seemingly impossible assignment—the command—to feed a crowd with only a little bit of food.

In 2 Kings, an unnamed man brings twenty loaves of bread and some ears of corn to Elisha. He is doing this in fulfillment of the Biblical command to give the first fruits of the harvest, that is, giving before you know how much you're going to have.

I remember some years ago at a meeting at another church, where a member was encouraging others to pledge and to use automatic transfer from their banks to do their giving. She explained, "I pay God first." It's the contemporary version of what the man in 2 Kings was doing—making a commitment to give up front, not just from what is left over. "First fruits" giving is a way of reminding ourselves that all that we have is gift from God—we are just deciding what we will give back.

So this man brings his offering, 20 loaves of bread and some corn. Ordinarily, Elisha would have taken this food to the temple for offering; from there, it might have been distributed to those in need. Instead, Elisha proposes to give it to the crowd that is gathered. That's not how this giving is usually done, and more than that, there's not enough to go around. His servant objects, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

But Elisha says, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord: 'They shall eat and have some left.'" And that's what happens.

In John, we've got the same story on steroids. It's all pumped up. The crowd is much bigger and the supplies much smaller. There are 5,000

people gathered, and only five loaves and two fishes to be found. This potluck is not happening.

Once again these crowds are a nuisance. John tells us, “A large crowd kept following him,” and Jesus moves up the mountain a bit with his disciples, trying to put a little distance between himself and the crush. But still they pursue him—John goes on, “...he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him.”

Unexpectedly, then, Jesus decides they’ve got to feed this mob. He asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Philip responds like Elisha’s servant—with dismay and maybe some impatience, too. He answers by stating the obvious: “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

Meanwhile, Andrew must be figuring that Jesus is still expecting them to lay out a spread, so he canvasses the crowd. He finds just one person who has packed provisions—a boy with two fishes and five loaves. It’s obviously not enough for the crowd—a thousand people sharing one loaf of bread? Not much of a picnic. And what about the boy who brought the food? He doesn’t say a word. We don’t know if he freely offered the food, like the man in 2 Kings, or whether he gave it reluctantly when Andrew saw that he had it. Either way, the boy must have been watching with some wistfulness and disappointment as his supper was carried off, and maybe some anger as well. What’s the point, really, of trying to give everyone a crumb? No one will have enough. And why should he share his food with those who didn’t plan ahead?

How much is enough, anyway? Economists now tell us that there is enough food or food producing capacity in the world to feed everyone, and for many years we were seeing significant progress on reducing world hunger. But since 2017 the numbers are going in the wrong direction, and people in Haiti, Sudan, Nigeria, Yemen, Palestine and more are threatened with famine.

Enough to go around, if everyone shares in the world’s abundance. That means that we who have the most have to let go of it, give away more of what we have been given. Yes, we give billions in humanitarian aid, but it’s

a vanishingly small percentage of our federal budget. (ask what people would estimate...the answer is 1 per cent). Meanwhile, we continue to consume more and more of the world's resources.

Giving of all kinds--time, money, and more--has declined in this country.¹ We are also sharing less of our selves—fewer Americans volunteer.² Even here at St. Paul where we are blessed with such abundance of good leadership, many of our most active members are concerned that we aren't drawing enough new energy and new people into our ministries. Most of us would say that we long for more young families. We probably would agree that Sunday school is one of our most important ministries, a way to nurture faith and to keep the promises that we make to children who are baptized here, and yet this year we had to let it go. [but maybe not for long? We are seeing some eager preschoolers here!] In September we'll hold a ministry fair here to invite all to share in God's work in this congregation and community. What can you bring to share, what little bit that God will multiply, so that our life together might bear witness to God's abundance?

When we do give—when God opens our hands—sometimes even what seems like a little gift can do so much more than we imagined. It's the loaves and fishes all over again, whenever you give to a challenge grant where another donor matches whatever you give. A few dollars go a long way in poor countries around the world--\$10 for 10 chicks to start a poultry flock; \$125 for a micro-loan to start a small business; \$250 to feed a child for a year. The time and money you give right here, for quilt-making or FISH or Hope Dining Room. God uses our giving to save lives and bring hope.

And giving changes us. When you give more, you realize you don't need everything you thought you did. There's enough to go around. Enough money. Enough time. Enough energy. Enough love. Maybe you feel like you're coming up empty on some of those—but when we share what we have, we have enough. Sharing what we have, we come to know the abundant life that God promises. That abundance is ours as gift, not to keep but to enjoy and to share and to give away.

¹ Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity*, 2019.

² Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*; and also corroborated in *Paradox of Generosity*.

We get a little taste of that abundance here, where we come each week to be fed. Here, we gather at the communion table where a little bread and wine are distributed to a crowd. Here, we eat and drink God, in that morsel of bread and mouthful of wine. It isn't what you'd call a meal anywhere else. But here, it is enough.

So eat and drink, and taste the goodness of God in this meal that fills us up, and sends us away hungry--hungry for justice, that all the world might eat.