

Having More Than Enough

John 6: 1-21

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 26th July 2009

What do we do with a text like this? In a postmodern, hyper-rationalist, hyper-skeptical age, what do we do with this miracle story? Do we even believe in miracles? What is a miracle? Do we just accept this text at face-value – “The Bible said it, I believe it, and that’s good enough for me.” Is that good enough? Maybe. It’s not enough for many who hear a story like this, knowing that miracles like this don’t happen every day (if ever), exactly as they are described here. Yes, I believe Jesus was a worker of miracles. Yes, I believe that miracles still occur. But what does this text mean, where is the kernel of good news in this story in our day when resources are scarce, the multitudes are still hungry, and people are walking away from the church in Europe and North America feeling not fed, not satisfied, but empty? What do we do with a text like this?

Apart from trying to explain the miracle, at the very least we can say there’s a direct connection in Jesus’ ministry with God and food. There’s a link between spirituality and food, between our hearts and our stomachs. How we prepare food, eat food, share food all have theological dimensions. Think of the kosher dietary laws within Judaism. Think of the presence of a table at the center of Christian worship space. Within Christianity, we generally don’t have dietary laws (we love our potluck suppers too much). Some Christians promote vegetarianism. Many Roman Catholics won’t eat meat on Fridays during Lent. Although, even this rule was subject to change several years ago when the feast day of St. Patrick fell on a Friday during Lent. Several Catholic bishops suspended the rule for just March 17 so that the Irish could celebrate with corned beef and a pint of Guinness.

Food matters to God. How and what people eat matter to God. Food helps to proclaim God’s love in the kingdom. Some of the foods we eat have a religious background. To this day, the bulk of the fish hauled out of the Sea of Galilee are called St. Peter’s Fish – otherwise known as tilapia. One Presbyterian minister named Sylvester Graham (1794-1851), invented one of the first health foods – you know where this is going – a cracker for his congregation to eat, a Graham cracker in 1829. There was a sect of Christians known as the Millerites, who believed that Jesus would return in 1843. They waited and waited their way into what was called “the Great Disappointment.” Some believed that Jesus had in fact returned, but it was a spiritual, that is invisible advent. These Christians believed they were living in the already-present millennial kingdom; these Adventists came to believe that as part of their new identity they should invent alternative foods, signs of not being in the world. Peanut butter was later invented in this tradition, as well as a variety of cold breakfast cereals, including something called a “corn flake.” The corn flake was perfected by Adventist devotee John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943) in a spiritual community known as the Battle Creek Sanitarium, Michigan. Food can be spiritual.

Crowds of people follow Jesus around the Sea of Galilee, hungry for his teaching and preaching. Jesus also knew that he (along with the disciples) had a responsibility to care for them. You can’t just feed the soul without also feeding the stomach; spirit and body have to be held together. To tend to one’s spirit one must also attend to the body; care for the body must

include care for the spirit. In God's kingdom, in God's vision for this world, the two are never separated. They are inextricably linked.

John tells us, "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.'" So, what is this sign? Is it the relationship between spirituality and food? Is it the linking of body and spirit? Not really. Every Jew would have assumed such things. Was the miracle the sign? Yes, but how do we hear – or see the sign – how do we hear this text as good news and food for our hungry souls. What is the miracle, what is the sign?

Yes, turning five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed 5,000. Yes, providing so much food that each was able to eat as much as he or she wanted. When they were "satisfied" – *satisfied* – they gathered up fragments, "so that nothing may be lost," and filled twelve baskets of bread left over. There's more leftover *after* the meal than before. Presumably, the leftovers were for the ones who served.

How did they go from Philip's statement, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," to Jesus' directive, "Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost"? This seems to be the critical question for us, the heart of the text. How did they go from a skeptical response to Jesus' statement, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" to having twelve baskets of bread leftover? How does this shift take place within the heart of God's people? How does this turn, this move occur? For, that's the amazing thing here. Yes, the actual feeding of the multitudes is significant. The fact of the miracle is important. But perhaps the more profound miracle here, easily overlooked, is the changed perspective. A transformation of perspectives among disciples, from their focus on the seemingly impossible, overwhelmed by the burdens of moment which averts their focus upon God and thus limits what we think God can do, to seeing what God can do.

The real miracle is a changed perspective. Whenever our perspectives change and we discover what God can do in us and through us, that's a miracle – because all of us are so set in our ways and sometimes so stubborn, skeptical, and suspicious that it's well nigh impossible for God to do anything through us. It has to with perspective.

Is the glass half-empty or half-full? It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? Yes, there are optimists and there are pessimists. The glass metaphor goes deeper than that. If it's half-empty, then one must be sure to conserve what's left because soon it will be all gone. The focus concentrates around absence and there's anxiety around having nothing. If it's half-full, then the assumption is on fullness, sufficiency, there's something left to share.

"Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Jesus said. "He said this to test" Philip. The question operates like a Buddhist koan. How we answer the question says something about our perspective. Philip clearly sees that there's not enough. Andrew, on the other hand, tries to answer in the realm of the possible, "There is a boy here," he says, "who have five barley loaves and two fish." I want to say, "Yeah, Andrew, good answer! You get it. That's the attitude." He answers correctly. Then it fizzles out, "But," he adds, "what are they among so many people?" That infernal, "But."

Will there be enough? That's what so many ask every day. I know that question and the emotions that go with it. My parents weren't wealthy. Going out for dinner at McDonald's or Burger King on Thursdays, payday, was a big treat. We never went without, but there was always anxiety around not having enough. My grandmother, being the thrifty Scot that she was, was always looking for ways to cut corners, to pinch pennies, to save, to conserve energy. I grew up with a perspective of scarcity, the glass as always half-empty. In the ways of the world – save, conserve – are noble and necessary ways to live. In a culture driven by economical impulses, fiscal responsibility is essential. We can't be foolish. We need to be practical. In this economy, we have to prepare for the rainy day.

It was only much later did I realize that while this save and conserve philosophy might have served my financial well-being, it did not serve me well. It did not serve me when it came to the well-being of my soul and in matters of the heart. To act as if there's not enough leads one to conserve and then ultimately to constrict the living of the heart. Very often the emotions underneath this way of being are full of fear and anxiety. While this save and conserve philosophy has served my financial well-being, it has not served me well when it comes to my understanding of God's love for me and the world – it could not teach me about the abundance and extravagance of God's love. The kind of love that conquers fear and helps to ease our anxiety, the love of God that gives and gives and pours forth, like a "fountain of all goodness," as Calvin (1509-1564) liked to say. To act as if there's enough – more than enough – leads us, in matters of the heart, to do the opposite of conserve, not to hoard but to share, not to constrict but to open up the flow of love. Matters of the heart ultimately overflow and shape what we do with our financial resources and our time and gifts. They're all connected in God's perspective.

Parker J. Palmer is one of the wisest men I know in our age. I don't know him personally, but wish I did. His writings have been a companion to me for decades. He pretty much sums up the point of this "sign" or "miracle" here when he wrote, "The quality of our active lives depends heavily on whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance. Do we inhabit a universe where the basic things that people need – from food and shelter to a sense of competence and of being loved [and I would add healthcare] – are ample in nature? Or is this a universe where such goods are in short supply, available to those who have the power to beat everyone else to the store? The nature of our actions will be heavily conditioned by the way we answer those bedrock questions."¹ This is what's behind, I think, Jesus' test question. Is there enough bread? Which is it: scarcity or abundance? Answering one way leads to the kingdom, the other way leads to exile. "In a universe of scarcity," Palmer explains, "only people who know the arts of competing, even of making war, will be able to survive. But in a universe of abundance, acts of generosity and community become not only possible but fruitful as well."²

Tragically, "every time we act on the scarcity assumption, we help create a world in which scarcity becomes a cruel reality." It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the story of the loaves and fishes, "Jesus makes a dramatic attempt to break people of the scarcity habit by revealing the reality of abundance." And the gospel of John is all about the abundance of God – whether it's Jesus turning water into wine, that's 180 gallons of water into the finest wine (John 2: 1-10); or telling us there are many dwelling places in the Father's house (John 14:10), or feeding the multitudes. Jesus, speaking for God, embodying the love and presence, the very life

of God, says to us, “I came that [you] might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10).” “Abundantly” here, from the Greek *perissón*, means “superfluous,” or, in other words, “more than is really necessary.”³

In his *Commentary* on John 6, John Calvin said, “Christ plainly showed that he not only bestows spiritual life on the world, but that his Father commanded him also to nourish the body. For abundance of all blessings is committed to his hand, that, as a channel, he may convey them to us; though I speak incorrectly by calling [Jesus] a *channel*, for he is rather the living fountain flowing from the eternal Father.”⁴

This is where I need to be, where I want to live, with this mindset, claiming this truth, reminded of God’s abundance, receiving from God’s abundance, and free to make decisions living my life from *that* perspective. Yet, so often, our faith mirrors that of Philip and Andrew, who could not see past the present and what we don’t have. We tend to base our living on our own scarcity or even on our own fears of insufficiency. So we hoard and save and worry and end up living life in safe, but small measures. “We pull back when we should push forward. We give in to our fear of a shortfall rather than exercising faith in God’s abundance. But Christians are constantly on the call to go places where we have never been, to do things that we have never attempted and to be things we have never envisioned.”⁵

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Where? *From out of the abundance of God.* For Jesus knew, with God there’s always more than enough. So the crowd sits down on the tall grass. He takes loaves – takes what is available. He offers it up to God and gives thanks. The multiplication follows thanksgiving. Then he shares it, from out of his *assumption of abundance.* And after everyone is *satisfied*, there’s plenty leftover. That’s what God’s kingdom is like. That’s the kind of good news we hunger for. It’s the kind of miracle we can experience. It all depends upon our perspective.

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¹ Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 124.

² Palmer, 125.

³ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 206. The same word is used in John 6: 12 to describe the leftovers.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, www.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.xii.i.html>

⁵ Charles Hoffman, “More Than Enough,” *The Christian Century*, July 25, 2006, 18.