

**Sunday, July 29, 2018**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 (Year B)**  
John 6.1-21  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

Our Gospel readings for the next five weeks are the “Bread of Life Discourse,” found in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. In this discourse, Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the “bread of life” and provides some explanation as to what this means. This discourse begins with the famous feeding of the 5,000 with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish. While Jesus does not use the term “bread of life” in today’s reading, bread does feature prominently, setting the stage for the discourse that is to follow. So important is this particular story that it is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. But while “the Synoptic Gospels call attention to Jesus’ compassion for the crowd, John’s emphasis is on leading the disciples to deeper belief and recognition of the power of Jesus as the one who brings life to the world” (*Synthesis*, Proper 12, July 29, 2018). As the one who provides and indeed is the “bread of life.” This is particularly emphasized in that John does not call this a miracle, but a “sign.” An event that reveals something significant about who Jesus is, and in turn, about who God is.

Hopefully, the primary theme of the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is obvious. As we are told, Jesus started off with five loaves of bread and two fish. With these meager rations, everyone ate as much as they wanted. And when they were well-fed, the disciples gathered up the leftovers, filling twelve baskets. The key message in this turn of events is one of generosity and abundance. Of the generosity in providing an abundance of food.

But how did this happen? Some say that in blessing the bread and the fish, Jesus somehow multiplied the amount of food he had to work with. As a result, this story is sometimes referred to as the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Others—perhaps a little more skeptical or even pessimistic—have argued that what actually may have happened is that it wasn’t just the boy who brought food, but many others brought food, as well. Which actually makes sense. Most sensible people would not travel out to a remote place for the day without taking provisions. So—as the reasoning goes—when people saw that the boy was generous in giving what he had to help feed the people, when Jesus began distributing the bread, they were touched by these acts of generosity and started pulling out what food they had brought and sharing it with those around them. This latter explanation does not in any way diminish from what happened. Either God provided the food directly, or God worked through the people present, touching their hearts to be generous and share what they had with those who did not have. Regardless of how it happened, there was a miracle. When those present were most in need, generosity happened. As a result, abundance happened. Starting with what seemed to be nothing, they ended up with an abundance stemming from a generous spirit. Regardless of how it actually happened, God—directly or indirectly—provided in abundance.

That is the core message of this story. God’s abundance of love and grace and mercy for his people. And God’s generosity in providing for our needs.

As I reflected on this theme of abundance, I found myself pondering, “Where is the abundance in our lives?” Not the abundance of material things, but the abundance of God’s love promised

in the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Sometimes, it's hard to see the abundance of God's love and grace in our lives. Particularly when we are swamped with so many tasks and people that demand our attention. I was drawn back to a couple of weeks ago when I experienced abundance, and not in a good way. I had one of those weeks that seemed to erupt into chaos. I was experiencing some extra work demands. And whenever I had set in my mind what I was going to do for the day to tackle those needs, all of a sudden I would be hit with additional, unexpected demands. New situations needing my attention. People suddenly needing my time. Nothing that was a true crisis. And nothing that I couldn't handle. But adding to my already busy schedule, nonetheless. To complicate my ability to cope, I was not able to escape to the solitude and tranquility of my home. At the same time as the work craziness, there were some unexpected things at home that further added to the morass. During that week, my entire life felt chaotic and out of my control. Now, admittedly, it was not all that bad, really. I've dealt with worse. But for someone who likes order and control in his life, it was enough to make me feel a little anxious. To cry out to God, "What now?" This is the kind of abundance I did not need!

Everything did work out and everything got done. And I even managed to do it with an efficiency that actually left me with a little extra free time. A little grace in the wake of it all. Right after that, I had a meeting with my spiritual director and told him about the sense of feeling in chaos. He observed that particularly when we are feeling that sense of chaos and being overwhelmed in our personal lives, it is actually exacerbated by other, non-tangible factors around us. Social pressures. Political angst. Societal unrest. Whatever insanity is being reported in the nightly news. Whatever concerns are being expressed in our social circles. Whatever dis-ease is being experienced culturally. I hadn't thought about that, but as I analyzed my own feelings, I realized he was right. We don't only deal with what bombards us on a daily basis at home and at work. It's also the other, non-tangible "stuff" that we hear around us and subconsciously take in, contributing to what we are feeling and experiencing. Increasing our sense of lost control and chaos.

And then, I thought of all of you. Those I am charged with pastoring and caring for. If I'm feeling those things in my life—that sense of chaos and uncertainty and loss of control—it's highly likely that some of you are too. Which then raised the follow-up: What needs to be done to address it? My immediate thought was that hopefully, this is a place of refuge from the insanity of the world, from the chaos of our daily lives. Not that we can permanently escape. But sometimes even having an hour or two where we are able to shift our focus away from the rest of our life is just what we need. A time and space for respite. A place of sanctuary. A place where we can come and hear God's word. A message that gives us hope and assurance of God's love in a world that sometimes seems devoid of love. A message that might provide the strength we need to go back out and face whatever awaits. A message that might just ease the burden a little.

In the couple of weeks following, I periodically returned to my conversation with my spiritual director, with an eye toward how the church seeks to convey the love of God as a way of providing respite from what plagues us in our everyday lives. There are certainly many ways. In our time of fellowship, where we support and nurture each other. In our outreach ministries, where we look beyond ourselves to help a hurting world. In our pastoral care, where we care

for each other's needs. And then there are the liturgical aspects. In the Word and Sacraments. So, on any given Sunday—the time of respite provided to those who enter here—what is the most significant conveyor of that message? While I might like to think it is the sermon that would not be the case. Rather, the primary means that we are meant to encounter God's love, God's grace, God's nurture, is not in words, but in an experience. In the Eucharist. A sacramental demonstration—an outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible grace that is God's love. An outward and visible sign of God's generosity and abundance that, like the feeding of the 5,000, is centered on bread.

This is what Jesus seeks to convey in today's Gospel. Not just in the feeding of the multitude with bread. But in the very context of the story. The telling of this story in John's Gospel is the only account to note that the event occurred near the time of Passover. For the early Christian readers of the story—and for us—this is meant to make an explicit connection of the feeding of the 5,000, of Jesus as the “bread of life,” with the Last Supper, which occurred at the feast of the Passover. What happens at the feeding of the 5,000 is meant to evoke images of the Eucharist. The classic formula for the actions at Eucharist are: take, bless, break, give. The bread is taken—received as a gift from the people. It is blessed, giving thanks to God for his bounty. It is broken, representing Christ's body broken on the cross. And it is given to feed the people. We see this formula in Jesus's actions at the feeding of the 5,000. He takes the bread (and the fish) offered by the boy. He gives thanks to God. And then he breaks the bread and distributes it to the people. Giving them just what they needed in that moment.

The 5,000 fed by Jesus probably had little idea of the significance of what Jesus was actually doing. For them, he was giving the physical nourishment they needed at that time. But for those of us who follow, who know the full story of what Jesus accomplished, we see a broader message in the Eucharist.

Our catechism (BCP page 859) tells us that the Eucharist is to be a continual remembrance, through bread and wine as symbols of Christ's body and blood, of his life, death, and resurrection. That through the Eucharist, we receive “forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life” (BCP, 859-860). This one sacramental act encompasses the entirety of God's love for us. The extent of God's love for us. That he was willing to give his only Son for our sake. That through the death and resurrection of his Son, we receive the forgiveness of ALL our sins. That in this sacred meal we are nourished and strengthened in our lives of faith. And in partaking of this meal, we are brought ever closer to Christ and to one another as our means of support and nurture. It is in this weekly meal that we receive strength and courage to walk out of this place and face the world, no matter what it throws at us. Knowing that we are not alone. Knowing that Christ is with us, that the Spirit of Christ is within us, that God is supporting and strengthening us. So that, as our opening collect today tells us, “with [God] as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal.”

In this, Christ truly is the bread of life. The bread of our very lives. Available to us again and again. Such is God's generosity. Such is God's abundance.