

Sunday, July 25, 2021
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 (Year B)

2 Kings 4.42-44; John 6.1-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/892715607986063>

(Sermon begins at about 18:10)

“Eucharist”

We just heard the well-known story of the feeding of the 5,000 as reported in the Gospel according to John. This is the only miracle contained in all four Gospels. Which tells us that this event is particularly important in the life and ministry of Jesus. While all four Gospels report what happened, each contains slightly different details. So, let's look at what makes this particularly important from John's perspective. And, depending on who you talk to, John's version of the feeding of the 5,000 carries greater significance than do the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

Jesus says to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (Jn 6.5). Unlike the other Gospel accounts, we are told that Jesus said this to test Philip, “for he himself knew what he was going to do” (Jn 6.6). No other Gospel notes this. But then again, this is consistent with John's portrayal of Jesus—what we refer to as his Christology. John has what we refer to as a “high Christology,” meaning that he incorporates more aspects of Jesus' divinity than do the other Gospels. We'll touch on this a little more in a bit. Philip answers, “Six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (Jn 6.7). This skepticism echoes that of Elisha's servant in today's Old Testament reading when Elisha commands him to feed the 100 people present. Only here, there aren't just 100 people, but 5,000. This also echoes Moses' exasperation at God's command to feed the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. Philip's response is reasonable and rational, focusing on the practicalities about money and the lack of food. Like Elisha's servant and Moses before him, he is focusing on the human practicalities. He is focusing on scarcity. But Jesus is not concerned with human practicalities. He is more concerned with divine practicalities. And that would be divine extravagance, divine abundance.

Another disciple, Andrew, notes that “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” (Jn 6.9). At this point in his ministry, the disciples have witnessed Jesus doing some spectacular things, like healing people of various infirmities and casting out demons. But they still do not have a clear idea of just who Jesus is. Of what he is capable of. After having everyone sit down, “Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted” (Jn 6.11). After everyone had their fill, they gathered up the leftovers, which filled twelve baskets. Talk about abundance!

People were starting to get a clearer idea of who Jesus was. As we are told, the people began to comment, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (Jn 6.14). This assessment is confirmed for the disciples a little while later. The last part of our Gospel reading is post-

feeding of the 5,000. Jesus has gone off by himself to pray and recharge after a busy day of teaching, feeding, and healing the people. The disciples have gone on ahead to Capernaum without Jesus. When their boat gets caught in a storm, Jesus walks across the sea to them, and they are naturally terrified. To reassure them, he says, “It is I; do not be afraid” (Jn 6.20). “It is I” is better translated as “I am.” In so doing, Jesus identifies himself to the disciples with the divine name, “I AM.” The same name that God conveyed to Moses when speaking to him through the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3.14). This is a turning point in John’s Gospel. From here on out, Jesus is much more open about just who he is.

The key message of the feeding of the 5,000 is, of course, divine abundance. Jesus’ ministry goes on to illustrate this theme in a variety of ways, both small and great. Culminating with Jesus’ death and resurrection, which results in the ultimate demonstration of God’s extravagance, God’s abundance. In the well-known words of John 3.16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” You can’t get much more extravagant than that. You can’t show much greater abundance than that. This is so central to who we are as God’s people that we commemorate God’s abundance every week through another meal—the Eucharist.

To fully appreciate this, we need to look at Eucharist from the perspective of John’s Gospel. Unlike the other three Gospels, the Gospel according to John does not have an account of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. At least not in the same way. In each of the three Synoptic Gospels, we are told that Jesus specifically instituted the Last Supper. “While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’” (Mt 26.26-29). And that in so doing, he instituted the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. But in John’s account of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, we are not given any details about the meal itself. Only that during supper, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. The emphasis being on foot washing, not the Eucharist.

Some scholars have argued that in John’s Gospel, the feeding of the 5,000 serves as the institution of the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. Some of these base their claims on the additional fact that what follows the feeding of the 5,000 is the extended “Bread of Life” discourse, in which Jesus talks at length about him being the bread of life. The final part of that discourse echoing Eucharistic language, with Jesus saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6.51). He then continues with, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day” (Jn 6.53-54). As one commentator notes, “To share in the eucharistic meal is not to remember or commemorate one particular event, but is to share in all of Jesus’ life, including ultimately his death. Participation in the eucharist creates a relationship between Jesus and the believers that contains within it the promise of new life.”¹

What better way to demonstrate that than in the feeding of a multitude? After all, that is what Eucharist is. Feeding of the multitude of God's children. In many ways, the feeding of the 5,000 seems a more appropriate image for the institution of the Eucharist than the Last Supper as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels. The feeding of the 5,000 certainly contains all the liturgical elements of the Eucharist. The classic formula for Eucharist being take, bless, break, and give. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it by giving thanks to God, breaks it, and gives it to the people. This is what happens in all the accounts of the feeding of the 5,000. But in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we are told Jesus blessed the bread. John's version is the only one in which we are told that Jesus gave thanks. The Greek word for thanks being *eucharistia*, the root of our term, Eucharist.

Aside from the liturgical elements, which are also included in the Synoptic accounts of the institution of the Last Supper, John's account of the feeding of the 5,000 seems a more appropriate image for Eucharist merely because of who was there. Because of who participated. The Last Supper meal was essentially an exclusive event. The only ones reported as being there were the twelve disciples and Jesus. It is assumed there were probably others present, as well. But certainly not a multitude. But the feeding of the 5,000 was open to anyone who wanted to be there. Those in attendance, which did include Jesus' inner circle, also included the poor, the marginalized, those most in need of God's love. Those most in need of God's abundance. All who were in need of being fed—be it physically or spiritually or both—were welcomed. All who were in need of being fed—be it physically or spiritually or both—were indeed fed. And they were fed in abundance.

This quality of abundance is a key aspect of Eucharist that is not readily conveyed through the traditional accounts of the institution of the Last Supper. Not that there wasn't plenty of food at Jesus' last Passover meal with his disciples. But, at least for me, the accounts always seem to end abruptly, almost as if the supper had not been finished. Almost as if the whole incident with Jesus telling of Judas' impending betrayal cast a pall on the meal, so that upon hearing that news, they just pushed back from the table. The feeding of the 5,000 is first and foremost a story of God's abundance. All were satisfied with plenty of leftovers to spare. Reflecting the abundance of God's love and concern for his people. Something that is inherently a part of our sacrament of Eucharist.

The other quality of abundance conveyed through the feeding of the 5,000 is that having been fed with the heavenly meal, we are to carry that ministry of abundance out into the world. Something that is not conveyed through the accounts of the Last Supper. As one commentator beautifully notes regarding the feeding of the 5,000: "there is plenty left over — 'twelve baskets' of fragments, a basket for each disciple. It's as if Jesus says to them, *Listen: This is who I am, and what I've come to do. If you want to follow me, feed my sheep — even when you think it's impossible. In the end, there will be enough. Your cups will overflow. And then we'll gather up the fragments, so that nothing will be lost and you will have sustenance for your ministry.*"² This carrying of God's abundance out into the world after we have been fed by the Eucharistic meal is reflected in the post-communion prayer we are currently using:

God of abundance, you have fed us with the bread of life and cup of salvation; you have united us with Christ and one another; and you have made us one with all your people in

heaven and on earth. Now send us forth in the power of your Spirit, that we may proclaim your redeeming love to the world and continue for ever in the risen life of Christ our Savior. Amen.

Sometimes we in the church can get hung up on what happens at the Eucharist. Theological debates about the Real Presence of Christ. About what happens, how it happens, and when it happens. Is it transubstantiation or consubstantiation or just a memorial? These are all questions that we cannot possibly answer this side of the veil. What is important is that what happens is a mere foretaste of the heavenly banquet that we will all one day share. That it is a symbol of God's great abundance, of God's unbounded love, that all are invited to share in. And that once fed in that meal, we go out and share that abundance with others. Just like what happened on that mountain by the Sea of Galilee. But most important, the feeding of the 5,000 is a message to us that in this world that tends to look at everything through a lens of scarcity, that our God is all about abundantly providing for our needs even as he calls us and commissions us to help provide for the needs of others. That is the true meaning of Eucharist.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1920.

² "Enough: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Ninth Week after Pentecost," SALT, July 19, 2021.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-christian-lectionary-resource>.