

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – July 25, 2021 – More Than They Expected
Ephesians 3:14-21 and John 6:1-21**

Early in John's Gospel, Jesus transforms water into wine during a wedding party in Cana. And, here, in the lush grass of the Galilean countryside, he supplies a hungry crowd numbering in the thousands with bread enough to spare. This miracle, which is documented in each of the four gospels, serves as yet another reminder of God's astounding abundance. Time and time again, Jesus provides more than the people expect - even more than they need.

In our second lesson this morning, we glimpse the glaring chasm between the disciple's limited imagination and the provision that Jesus will ultimately supply. A crowd has gathered, exceeding the population of many ancient villages. Understandably, Jesus is concerned about the physical needs of the depleted masses. He turns to Philip, one of the twelve, and asks, "Where are we to buy food?"

Under normal circumstances, this is the natural question that any of us might ask. But there is nothing typical about this occasion. Jesus, whom even the winds and seas obey, is eager to enact the divine initiative. And his question is intended to test Philip. The disciple answers the question literally, not by pointing the way to the

nearest store, but with a question of his own about where they are to secure the financial means to complete a transaction of this size.

To put this task in perspective, “two hundred denarii” was “about eight months of wages for the unskilled laborer.”¹ And even this “is a low estimate of how much money it would take to buy enough bread” for this overflowing crowd.² From an economic perspective, the poverty of this itinerant teacher and his closest disciples are no match for the physical longings of God’s people. Yet, as we know well, there is much more to this narrative than economic hardship and human need.

As Max Lee observes, “the spiritual and material care of God’s flock is ultimately something miraculous that only God can do.”³ Faced with such pressing needs, we wonder if the disciples of Christ will be “paralyzed by the impossibility of the task,” or if they will “present what they have, however meager, and have faith that Jesus can make a miracle out of it.”⁴ It’s all of matter of expectation.

In time, we’ve each met people whom, when asked for an assessment of the day’s challenges, will tell you, “oh, it’s just the same old same old. Different day,

¹ Max J. Lee, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 193.

² Lee, 193.

³ Lee, 193.

⁴ Lee, 193.

same problems.” Their words drip with the familiar cynicism of the author of Ecclesiastes who falsely declared “There is nothing new under the sun.” As those who have been redeemed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we recognize the importance of resisting that mindset. In its place, we proclaim that life is more than a series of random, mundane events. And, as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we bear witness to divine hope, confident in the promise that God is still speaking.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus embraces the simple and understated. He uses the ordinary grapes of the vine, and the common grains of the field – transforming them into “the sacramental symbols of God’s grace.”⁵ In our second lesson, Jesus assumes the role of “a host at a Jewish meal.” He takes five barley loaves and two fish provided by a boy from the crowd, “gives thanks over it, and gives it to his ‘guests.’”⁶ When all have eaten, “twelve baskets of leftover pieces” remain, each symbolizing one of “the twelve tribes of Israel.”⁷ The inclusive nature of the feast is on full display. All have been welcomed and, mysteriously, there is still more than enough.

⁵ Gail R. O’Day, *John, The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck, (Abingdon Press, 1995), 591.

⁶ O’Day, 594.

⁷ Lee, 193.

It is curious, isn't it, that the vast majority of Americans today consume far more than our ancestors ever could have imagined? All too often, our burden is not scarcity, but excess. And yet, our consumption rarely slows. Because, we reason, we just might need it. Or the one that we already have may run out or break. Or, well, it was on sale, so why not?

In the Old Testament, God provides manna to the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. This gift represents "the abundance of God" which, importantly, "cannot be hoarded." By design, "the people have to learn to trust that God's abundance will be there, new every morning."⁸ And the message for us is clear. There is no use in grabbing all that you can. Today's provisions are enough for today.

Following Jesus' feeding miracle, the crowd is so impressed "that they declare him to be a prophet and intend to make him king."⁹ As Gail O'Day observes, "the crowd's reaction shows how difficult it is to receive Jesus' gifts on his terms without translating them immediately into one's own categories. Jesus' gift of food, the offer of his grace, provided the crowd with a glimpse of his identity, but they immediately tried to twist that identity to serve their own purposes." Their intent is not malicious,

⁸ John M. Buchanan, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 194.

⁹ O'Day, 597.

but in their desire “to make Jesus king,” they wish for him “to conform to pre-existent systems of power and authority.”¹⁰

The connections for us are ever-present. Even in our need, we often long for some semblance of control by seeking to exert our will over the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is. In the end, our efforts are futile, easily sidestepped by the One whose purposes cannot be manipulated or contained.¹¹

By the end of this passage, Jesus has dodged those who would make him king. Then, on his own terms, he has walked on water to demonstrate his glory to the disciples who are being tossed about on the stormy sea. In the midst of their trials, we consider that circumstances that terrify each of us: “sickness, financial insecurity, unemployment, unprecedented political upheaval, and, of course, that final threat, our own mortality. To us, as to them, come the saving words of our Lord, words that free us from all fear, ‘It is I. Do not be afraid.’”¹² May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁰ O’Day, 597.

¹¹ O’Day, 597.

¹² Buchanan, 195.