

Bread Shared

*A sermon preached on John 6:1-21 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on August 5, 2018*

I.

It's at the center of our tables for a reason.

I'm not talking about the lovely flowers that adorn your dining room table, or the stack of bills or pile of laundry that sits on your kitchen table (or maybe just mine). No, I'm talking about the baskets of bread that are plunked down right in the middle of tables as people eat together in restaurants all over the world.

Sometimes that bread is soft and neatly cut, with a side of cold herbed butter ready for your use. Other times, it's thick and crusty, crumbling as you tear it apart and smear it into the dish of olive oil and parmesan cheese. Some baskets overflow with heaping piles of hot yeast rolls dripping with honey butter, and other baskets bear the distinct flavor of the restaurant — tortilla chips and salsa, pita bread and hummus, crackers and cheese, you name it. But no matter the bread, the intent in its offering is both to feed and to share, each diner returning again and again to the common basket. This ritual is a gift to hungry (and sometimes even hangry!) diners of all kinds, everywhere, softening aching bellies and divided spirits with the staff of life.

Look down and you'll see bread anchored here at the center of our shared table too. For those of you now getting hungry, I'm sorry to tell you that these containers aren't filled with hot yeast rolls dripping with honey butter. But like the very substance of the thing itself, this bread binds us

together in Christ, filling our hungry bodies and souls with the gifts of God for the people of God.¹

II.

We begin today a four-week series about bread, settling back into rhythm with the lectionary which steadily moves through the sixth chapter of John in these late summer days. John 6 is not only the longest chapter in the fourth gospel, but also the only one that devotes so much space to one single theme — that of bread, its significance as a substance of physical and spiritual nourishment, and its connection to Jesus who says, “I am the bread of life.”²

This chapter-long theme of bread begins with the familiar story of feeding and sharing, abundance and enough — the miraculous meal for the multitudes that came to life from five simple loaves and two fish. In fact, this particular feeding story is the only of Jesus’s miracle stories recorded in all four gospels. When it comes up in the lectionary readings in the gospels of Matthew and John, it does so in the dead of the summer, almost like the lectionary compilers knew that these hot and long days are ones in which we would do good to remember the substance of our sustenance.

We meet Jesus by the Sea of Galilee near the town of Tiberias in John’s account of the story. For Passover draws near, that annual Feast of the Unleavened Bread, where Jews celebrate God’s deliverance of the people of

¹ This wonderful opening illustration directly inspired by a sermon by Judith Watt, proclaimed at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, August 3, 2014, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/080314.html>.

² William E. Hull, “John,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Luke-John*, p267.

Israel from their captivity in Egypt by sharing again in the gift of manna.³ Surely Jesus had Passover on his mind, for when that large crowd that had been following him as he healed the sick and taught the people, followed him straight up the mountain, he turned to his disciple Philip and wondered aloud, “where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

The question alone was revealing, because as the text makes clear, Jesus wasn't really asking for a straight answer. Rather, Jesus, looking past his own sure exhaustion from preaching and teaching all day, *saw* the people who assembled around him on that mountain. He saw Jews and Gentiles; those grateful for the Roman leadership and those who found it abhorrent; refugees and rulers; the anxious mother and the indignant patriarch, the squealing toddler and the hunched-over senior, the adulterer and the addict, the pious and the poor, the one who was sure he was perpetually right and the one convinced she was always wrong.⁴ Jesus saw them in their real need, and turning to his disciples, he asked how this need might be met.

Philip seemed to be the realist — ‘there's not enough,’ he says, ‘not even six months’ wages would buy what these people need to be filled!’ But while Philip was hand-wringing, Andrew had been busy — canvassing the crowd and finding a young boy with a small lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. Speaking words that ring as true now as they did then, Andrew questioned the possibility of his efforts, saying, “but what are they among so many

³ Helpful notes on Passover from Robert A. Bryant's commentary, “John 6:1-21,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p287.

⁴ Rachel Held Evans has a beautiful description of the people assembled in the multitudes that day, which can be found on her blog here: <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-feeding-five-thousand>

people?” Or in other words, *how can such a meager offering meet so great a need?*

III.

Oh, how I resonate with Philip and Andrew in this story. How often I behave like Philip, assessing what I have and feel certain it is insufficient for what stands before me. How certain I am that I have neither the time, or the money, or the ability, or the drive, or the patience, or the compassion to really *do it* – whatever task or project or possibility or need I see. How regularly I am overwhelmed with Andrew, looking around at the enormity of the evils in this world and doubting seriously that one person, one effort, one moment can make any meaningful difference to anyone. How sure I am that I see the scope of the solution, highly skeptical that the Creator of the world has something better to offer.

I know I'm not alone in this, because I hear you saying the same. It seems we all have been there, sharing this posture of disbelief that infects even the most optimistic among us. We read the papers, scan the headlines, watch the news, hear the stories, look around us and see the unraveling right before our very eyes. Children without a home or a meal or a safe space to learn and grow yield parents without a hope. Families flee the horrors of war and violence. Jobs are lost, and wages are cut. Sickness takes on countless forms. Relationships unravel, and addictions become the only way to cope. Institutions waver and topple; churches like ours try to do more with less. Racism, sexism, and nationalism grow like cancers in our midst. And we cry out: “what are these, our tiny efforts for hope and peace and joy and love

right in this little corner of the world – what are these among so deep the human sufferings and wide the problems of this world?”

If we're not careful, these matters, these weights of our worlds and the world, can have the effect of drive us away from one another into our own segregated corners of ideology or politics or capacity or resources. We take one look at the real and proverbial empty baskets and hungry people, unable to overcome the instinct to hoard whatever we've got to feed ourselves. We guard jealously our time, patrol our energies, shield our families, secure our money, and defend our roles, all the while covering our lives like a young child would cover his meal, ready to fend off those who would threaten what we have and hold so dear.

And in so doing, we forget that *our* faces are among the thousands, gathered on that grassy hill like sheep in our pasture, starving for nourishment that will satisfy our anxious minds, broken hearts, fearful souls, and flawed bodies. We forget that our hungers yearn for something deeper than fast-food religion, half-baked truths that come cloaked in spiritual styrofoam to be consumed alone and on the go.⁵ *We forget that to be satiated is not the same as to be nourished; to be stuffed is not the same as to be filled.* We forget about the One 'who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.'

We forget, but **Jesus** remembers, and remembers all. 'Five thousand in all,' the text says, all fully human and different and divided and flawed, yet they were fed, and fed together, not because they were found worthy, but simply because they were found hungry. For as Nora Gallagher says of this

⁵ Will Willimon's *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life* offers a meaningful description of 'the holiness of food' on p65.

story, “Jesus didn’t ask those thousands of people camped on that hillside whether they had confessed their sins or how clean they were. He [simply] fed them.”⁶

Somehow those five little loaves and two little fish held up, in spite of Philip’s economics, Andrew’s despair, and the gnawing hunger of the thousands. And we who hear this story centuries removed can’t help but to wonder: did the bread just magically multiply as hands smooth and wrinkled alike reached for more? Did baskets pop into the air and plop down on the grass, or did the rations slowly emerge from this little clump of people here and that little family over there, uncovering their portion and adding them to the common baskets they saw others doing the same? Were they filled with unleavened bread like that of Passover celebrations, or maybe did Jesus treat the crowds to hot yeast rolls dripping in honey butter?

The text doesn’t tell us. But what is made clear is that this miracle of abundance in a moment of scarcity was a sign, one that painted a clear picture of who Jesus was and what he meant for the world. By meeting as basic a human need as a hungry belly, Jesus indicated that these basic needs matter, that those who hunger shouldn’t only be fed with kind words and the best of intentions; rather, they are to be met with plenty — where all can feast until they are filled with ample leftovers for later. For as one preacher says, “in the hands of Jesus, little can become much, the few can become the many, and the weak can become strong.”⁷

⁶ Nora Gallagher, *The Sacred Meal*, p92.

⁷ Cheryl Bridges Johns, “John 1:1-21,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p289.

IV.

I suppose that's why our bread baskets come to share, why the best meals are those we enjoy with others, why it takes companionship with Christ and folks around our tables to create the abundant space where all are filled. Perhaps it's not an accident that the word "companion" derives from its Latin parts *com* ('with') and *panis* ('bread'); meaning that a 'companion' is one with whom you share your bread.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of this story, saying: "Miracles let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all. But in this story," she writes, "God tells us, out of God's own deep pain and sadness for the world, 'Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.'"⁸

And perhaps this is our invitation, dear friends, an invitation to move from scarcity to abundance, from fear to hope, from withholding to 'companion-ing', from hoarding to sharing, from waiting for food to fall from the sky to participating in God's miracles all around us, often as sweet as honey on our lips and as simple as a basket of bread in our midst.

May it be so! Amen.

COMMUNION TRANSITION

Mother Teresa once said: "when we hand [a person] bread, we are also giving them love." That seemed to be Jesus's pattern too that day, when faced with a crowd, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it in love — not because they were particularly worthy, but simply because they were

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p52.

hungry.. He did that again on the night he was betrayed, when he gathered around a meal with his disciples. From the table, he took the bread. He gave thanks to God for it, saying “this is my body, given for you.” In the same manner he took the cup, he gave thanks to God for it, saying “this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the sins of many. As long as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do so in remembrance of me.”

We come to the table of Love to remember today. Our lives move at such a pace and a tenor, that so often we forget the One in whom we find our nourishment, the Source of life in Jesus Christ our Lord. And so we come to remember and to feast on love.