

## John 6:1-21

My father always said that the rich will grow richer and the poor will grow poorer. It looks as though he wasn't quite right. Even though the numbers of the rich and poor are growing, so are their incomes. A Pew research report published in 2022 shows the change in the income and number of upper class has increased since 1971 and the numbers and income of the lower class have increased, but the middle class has shrunk in volume even though the income has increased. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/20/how-the-american-middle-class-has-changed-in-the-past-five-decades/>) It's no wonder that the middle class feels squeezed. It's almost how Philip felt when Jesus asked him how the disciples would feed the multitude of people Jesus saw coming towards them. Philip and the other disciples were concerned they didn't have the resources to care for the approaching mass, just like we sometimes believe we don't have enough to share with those who come asking.

But when Jesus faced the problem, everyone was fed. Andrew found a little boy with 5 barley loaves and two fish. The boy must have been poor because barley was the grain the poor people used to make bread. Yet even though he had little, he was willing to give it to Jesus and the disciples. After giving thanks Jesus distributed bread and fish to each person, giving each as much as they wanted, so every person present was no longer hungry. We know there were over 5,000 because in those days only the men were counted when a crowd gathered. And even though more than 5,000 people were fed, there were twelve baskets left over. Think about this... even when it looks as though you do not have the resources to help those in need God will find a way!

Martin Luther observed that faith is under constant siege between mammon and wealth on one side, and poverty on the other. Both rich and poor threaten God's word. In this lesson Christ exhorts a middle course, "teaching that we must come to rely on God, trust God in every need, and learn to be content with what God daily provides." The poor will not starve, for God will see to it. In death, the rich have no more than the average Christian (*Complete Sermons*, Vol 5, pp. 344-345). The Lord will provide, for rich and poor. Luther describes a middle-class existence for the people of God, not poverty, for God will provide for them, but not wealth, which affords nothing that the average Christian does not have. But he also seems to put both rich and poor in the same boat, implying that the Lord provides for both. The Lord will provide for rich and poor.

Luther obviously was not a great advocate of wealth as a sign of the Lord's blessing. He says in another sermon regarding God's bounty that we should recognize God's wonders, rely on them, and not despair, for the cherry tree does not despair though in winter it bears no fruit, and the field does not despair though in winter it lies frozen. "We ought to learn from these everyday wonders to trust in God and not despair" (*Complete Sermons*, Vol. 5, p. 347). About wealth he wrote, "We should, therefore, learn contentment and not become impatient and angry with God because we are not wealthy. Were we rich we might well become meaner and more sinful" (*Complete Sermons*, Vol. 5, p. 348). This comment, suggesting that wealth does not buy you much, that it is just as well not to be weighed down with its burdens, is mirrored in the views of nineteenth century English social critic John Ruskin. He remarked, "There is no wealth but life." It may well be that the best things in life are free.

Living life in a way that is willing to take responsible risks for the poor, is a happier one than the mad pursuit of and retention of wealth. When you are always worrying about money like Philip, life is not as enjoyable. That's why Philip and Andrew, worried as they

were about resources before trying to help the 5,000 men and more women and children, were so unhappy and burdened, while Jesus and the boy who provided the five loaves and the two fish did not agonize.

So, even though you may think living in the top percent of wealth is where you want to be, is it possible that the middle is the best place? A middle-class society does not have the rich/poor gap that plagues us today. It's also better, in the view of the famed Irish writer George Bernard Shaw. He believed that people in the middle live for others: "I have to live for others and not for myself, that's middle class."

When living in the comfortable middle, a person isn't so concerned about accumulating wealth. They don't have the pressure of always thinking about gaining wealth for themselves. They can do joyfully what John Wesley advised: "Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can".

Our lesson may indicate that the gospel writer John saw Jesus as neither an advocate of wealth nor an advocate of poverty, that a middle-class society will be best for the public as a whole. But we're way off-base if that's all we say, as if we Christians just need to will a middle-class existence and middle-class society for ourselves. We need to remember that Jesus intervened in feeding the 5,000 with a miracle. And that's what it takes for us and the rest of American society to find the middle, to avoid the temptations of wealth and to uplift the poor, to get us all in the same boat.

While preaching on this text Augustine said "...our Lord spoiling His vessels, and making them His Own, poured out the bitterness, filled them with sweetness. Let us love Him for He is sweet... We have begun to be some great thing; let no man despise himself; we were once nothing; but we are something. (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series Vol. 6, pp. 499-500).

Augustine speaks of God spoiling us and of God's sweetness. The material well-being we have is indeed miraculous, no less so than the miracles reported in the lesson: the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on water. There is no need for anyone to despise themselves because of their lack of wealth or resources in comparison to the wealthy. Though once nothing we are all in the same boat in God's eyes ---we are something. The Lord provides his blessings for both the rich and the poor.

And, I want to add, we as a congregation have been blessed for 25 years with a person who gave so much to our congregation. He has done far more for the church than we realize. Many of you have watched Bryan grow from a student to an outstanding organist. Bryan was instrumental in getting the organ set up as it is now and doing repairs to the organ. During covid he took the initiative to install a system so the congregation could have parking lot services. He has chosen hymns that you know, yet he hasn't repeated the same ones over and over. He has led the choir and kept the quality as the number of singers shrunk. He has brought in talented musicians for Christmas Eve services. He has blessed us with amazing preludes and postludes and offertories. Bryan has been extremely easy to work with as the musical director, and he has had amazing ideas that would help the church reach out to the community. The one that was embraced was the Trail of Treats. Perhaps next year we could start a community garden in his honor? Bryan, I just want you to know how much we have appreciated you and all that you have done for Immanuel. And know that you will be missed. May God's blessings be upon you wherever your path takes you. All glory be to God.