

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

July 28, 2024, The 10th Sunday After Pentecost, The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

“IF ONLY,” A FIRST PERSON SERMON

This morning, I want to tell you a story about what it was like to be around Jesus the teacher, healer and miracle worker; Jesus the Messiah. I also want to tell you a story about me, and a choice I once made that still haunts me, and still teaches me to this day.

Jesus has been walking through our region at the north end of the Sea of Galilee teaching and healing, in fact he had made his home in Capernaum. But he was often on the road, all the way south to Jerusalem and back to Galilee and places in-between, again and again in the last year or so. He travels with a group of twelve disciples and some of them are fishermen, so some of his travels are land, but sometimes they cross back and forth across the Sea of Galilee going from place to place by boat.

Wherever Jesus goes amazing things happen. When he teaches, he says things like the “Kingdom of God has come near,” and if you ever heard him say that, or saw the look in his eyes, you would believe what he was saying.

He calls himself the Son and talks about God as his Father. Our religious leaders can’t stand that he calls himself the Son of God, but my friends and I think they must not be really listening and feeling the truth of who Jesus is. Who else could do these miracles, or talk about God as if he and God had just sat down together for a long chat?

You should see the crowds that follow after Jesus whenever they hear that he is up north again, traveling around the Sea of Galilee. People who are sick come on their own if they can, or their families carry them, because he isn’t only a teacher but a healer and miracle worker.

I’ve been there when the blind get to see again, the deaf hear for the first time in their lives.

You should also see the look of amazement on the faces of those who haven’t walked for years, or maybe ever, when Jesus says to them “stand and walk.” And they stand and walk and sometimes leap for joy, that legs that have never worked are now whole and healthy.

Actually, you should see the looks on the faces in the crowd when they watch a woman who was blind look into the faces of her children for the first time. Or a man born deaf, hear his wife call him by name.

Jesus also heals people’s spirits somehow, so it’s not just people who are wounded and broken in obvious ways, but people who have broken places in their hearts and spirits that he heals.

When Jesus is home in Capernaum, or teaching around the north end of the Sea, huge crowds of us travel to hear him tell us about the Kingdom of God. We come to see signs and miracles happening like we’ve never seen or imagined before. Maybe even more than this, we come to just be with Jesus, because once you’ve seen him heal and teach you know, somehow more than you’ve known anything else in your life, that you are in the presence of God.

It used to be smaller crowds following him in the early days, but now that his name has gone out into the countryside, and towns near and far, the crowds have gotten so big. Sometimes he and his disciples will cross the north end of the Sea of Galilee by boat, and the crowds will walk hours to follow him and catch up.

The day I want to tell you about happened near the festival of Passover, when we remember God liberating our ancestors from slavery in Egypt over 1200 years ago. Once again Jesus and the disciples had traveled by boat across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee and once we saw the direction the boat was going we began walking.

Jesus had gone up onto the hillside to meet with his disciples and I had arrived ahead of many of the others so I was close by. That day the crowd was overwhelming. Later people would say that there were 5,000 people there, but that was only counting the men. Well, you can imagine what the women and children think about that kind of counting! We figured there were probably 20,000 to 30,000 people there in the crowd that day.

[Based on research by Megan McKenna in Not Counting Women and Children (Orbis, 1994), the ratio of women and children to adult men would be 5 to 1 or 6 to adult men. See <https://perspectivesjournal.org/posts/not-counting-women-children/>

I could see the look on the disciples' faces when Jesus asked Philip where they were going to buy enough bread to feed the crowd. There those disciples were on the hillside above the Sea and spread out before them was the biggest crowd they'd probably ever seen.

Philip was shocked! "Jesus," he said, "200 denarii wouldn't buy enough bread for them to each just have a little bit." As you know a working man gets paid 1 denarius a day, 200 day's wages, 200 denarii, wouldn't give people enough bread to give them strength to walk back around the Sea of Galilee. 200 hundred day's wages wouldn't even make a dent in filling up hungry people.

Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996, p. 116-117*

Now I wasn't the only one overhearing this conversation, my daughter heard them too. She has always had such a kind and giving nature. I'd seen her eyes widen when she looked down the hill at the size of the crowd, and after hearing Jesus' question, she reached into our bags to get the bread and fish that I had brought for our family, and she started to speak up, but I stopped her.

What could our little bit of bread and dried fish do to help?

And besides I'd brought that for my family. I had planned ahead and made sure that my husband and I, and our children, would be fed and cared for.

And now here she was trying to give away our bread and fish to Jesus. I've raised my children to be giving, but not like that.

I quickly grabbed the bag from her hands and pushed the bread and fish back in before others could see it. I didn't want anyone to see what we had brought and expect us to share it. It was for my family; you have to take care of your own, that's what my mother taught me, and that's what I was teaching my daughter.

But some other mother must not have been quick enough to stop her child because I heard Andrew say that a boy had given them 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. As you know barley loaves are the food of us poor people. It was what most of us ate, we couldn't afford the wheat breads of the rich.

Many of us also carried fish with us. It wasn't fresh fish, that wouldn't make sense for travel or for storage. Our fish was usually pickled for at home, or cured, salted or dried for home and travel.

Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 133

So, some mother's son had decided to give away his family's food to Jesus. But what could that tiny bit of food do for the thousands on the hillside?

Jesus then told his disciples to tell the people sit down. It was a really grassy area there on the hillside. As I looked down the hill and over those crowds covering it, I felt like I was seeing Psalm 23 come to life. Do you remember the place where the Psalmist says that the Lord who is his shepherd who "makes me lie down in green pastures?" (Psalm 23: 2) I felt like I was seeing a field of

sheep on that green hillside, feeling safe and waiting to be fed by Jesus. It was the most peaceful picture you wouldn't ever forget if you saw it.

The Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer

Then Jesus took the bread and the fish in his hands that the boy had given, and he said a blessing over them, giving thanks to God. *And then the world was changed*, because Jesus started handing out the bread and fish to the crowd, and you'd think that would just feed one family, but he just kept moving through the crowd. And I know you'll find this hard to believe, but he didn't run out of bread, and he didn't run out of the fish. Jesus just kept moving through the crowd passing out the food.

And there was plenty, it wasn't like everyone got a little square of bread and a morsel of fish. There was enough so that you could eat until you were full.

You can rest assured that most of us in that crowd never ate until we were full, we just ate until what little we had for that day's meal was gone. But not with that meal that Jesus served; 20-30,000 people filling a hillside and all of us had enough, more than enough.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds, Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3 Season after Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021, p. 194

(Having enough to eat was a rare experience for people in the crowd: poor, marginalized, peasant people.)

You know how it is at a meal; people eat until the last crumb is gone. But not that day. There was so much more than crumbs left; 12 baskets full of bread were left over. Twelve! Each of the 12 disciples was carrying one, gathering the bread that was left over.

It was like getting to look back 1200 years to our mothers and fathers of faith travelling from Egypt to the Promised Land, going out each morning to gather the manna in the wilderness. There was always enough for them for each for that day. God always provided enough for them and they learned to trust that God was their God.

On that day on the hillside Jesus provided more than enough for every single one of us.

The word spread so quickly through the crowd that it had all started with 5 loaves of barley bread and 2 fish that a boy had given to Jesus. Such a simple gift. But all I could think of then, and still think of today, is that moment I stopped my daughter. She just wanted to share with Jesus, she just wanted to share with hungry people.

But my hand shot out and I grabbed that bag of *our* food back from her, and stuffed the bread and fish back down deep in the bag.

If I'd known then that her tiny gift would have made such a big difference to so many people, I would have stayed silent and let her share.

I would have!

But I didn't. I stopped my daughter from sharing our little bit of food. If I'd known then that her tiny gift of our food would have been able to help *everyone* there, I would never have stopped her. And it's not that I want her to be remembered like the boy who shared his 5 barley loaves and 2 fish will be remembered. It's not that at all. I was just taking care of my own, like my mother taught me.

But, in the end, my daughter didn't learn from me, she learned from Jesus.

I didn't know that a tiny bit of sharing could change the world.

I didn't know that Jesus could use a tiny gift and turn it into something abundantly bigger.

I just didn't know that my daughter could have made such a big difference for God's people with the little bit that we had.

I just didn't know. It was only a little bit of bread and fish; I just didn't know.