

**John 6: 1-14 “A Child’s Small Gift” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/16/25**

So every once in awhile, it’s fun to dig up some trivia about the Bible. You probably know it is the most purchased book of all time, but did also you know it is the most frequently stolen? Apparently, certain readers grab it before they reach the Ten Commandments! Additionally, did you know that just 600 years ago, it was illegal to translate the Bible into any other language than Latin? John Wycliffe went ahead and did it anyway, translating it into English in the 14th century; 43 years after Wycliffe’s death, the Roman Catholic Church dug up his corpse, burned it, and threw the ashes in the river to punish him for his supposed sins. That’ll show him, huh? Finally, can you guess which miracle story from the New Testament is the only one which makes it into all four gospels? It is our story for today, the feeding of the 5000. The story’s lessons are so important that none of the gospel writers could leave it out.

The way John tells it, the story takes place around Passover, the feast that celebrates that ancient time when God led the people out of Egypt, through the sea, into the wilderness. There they received the law of God on a mountain, and there they were miraculously fed with manna in the wilderness. In our story today, the people have followed Jesus across the sea, the Sea of Galilee in this case, and they will go hungry if they are not fed. There are some intentional echoes between both stories. The crowds have been following Jesus because they’ve seen what he can do. There is a sense of almost desperation with this group, for many have been suffering from maladies of one sort or another. If you have ever encountered serious sickness, you understand going to great lengths to find healing. So Jesus positions himself on a mountain as the crowd draws near. Then Jesus turns to Philip and says, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” It’s a trick question because, as John tells the story, Jesus already knows what he’s going to do. He’s hoping that by now, Philip has picked up that through Jesus, God provides out of God’s gift of abundance. Wherever Jesus goes, life overflows with well-being. But Philip, and the church even today, doesn’t get it. Philip is thinking in old-world categories of there not being enough, of living in a time of scarcity. He says to Jesus, “It would take six months of my salary to

feed this big crowd.” We can’t afford it. We can’t spend our precious resources on people who just want a free lunch. President Lyndon Johnson said something similar back in the early 60’s which has been repeated over and over. Today it goes something like this: “Don’t forget, there are over 300 million of us Americans in a world of over 8 billion. They want what we’ve got – and we’re not going to give it to them.” Philip is just looking out for local interests if you will. He’s good with the numbers and quickly does the math – five thousand people at five bucks a head. He doesn’t have a spare 25 grand. He’s not like Tom Brady or Paris Hilton who can drop a quick 25 grand to get their dog cloned (ugh!). Anyway, Philip is a realist so don’t be too hard on him. He sees the gap between the need and the resources at hand and gives a real-world answer.

We know what it is to live in such a world – we have to be realistic about what we can and cannot do. The need is so great and the resources so small. With regards to hunger, it is still a huge problem in our world. Given the planetary crisis of climate change, war, government corruption, and blight, food supplies and distributions systems are at great risk. We are anxious about how long our planet can be safely inhabited and feed us as abundantly as it has for all of human history. That concern rightly prompts us to press our leaders to enact policies and practices which make sure no one goes hungry and that everyone’s basic needs are satisfied. Philip is living in that real world of scarcity we understand all too well. A story is told about a pastor who was encouraging her congregation to consider the potential of their church. She told them, “With God’s help, we can see the day when this church will go from crawling to walking.” The people responded, “Let the church walk, pastor, let the church walk.” She went on, “And when the church begins to walk, next the church can run.” They shouted, “Let the church run, pastor, let the church run!” She continued, “And finally the church can move from running to flying. Oh the church can fly! But of course, it’s going to take gifts of money and time for that to happen!” The congregation grew quiet, and from the back someone mumbled, “Let the church walk, pastor, let the church walk.” What do we have to offer in such a world? A few voices, some eloquent and strong, but sometimes wavering and stumbling. A few minds, some

sharp, but many getting tired from advancing years. A few hands, a few feet, a few dollars saved from providing for the necessities of life. What can we offer? Not very much – it's time to get realistic, Philip says. "We can't do much, so send them away. Let someone else deal with the problem." But in God's realm, according to Stephen Farris, "not very much" is not the same as "nothing at all." Saying to Jesus "We can do nothing here," is very close to saying to Jesus, "You can do nothing here – this is beyond your abilities, Jesus. You do some incredible things, but this is too much even for your gifts, so leave it alone." We can give Philip an "A" for arithmetic but an "F" for faith.

Then there's Andrew. There's nothing special about Andrew; like Philip, he isn't a front row disciple, rarely in the heart of the action. He isn't as famous as Peter, James or John so he and Andrew are kind of a tag team. They do little things like bring others to Jesus. Andrew brings his own brother, Peter, to Jesus. Philip brings Nathanael in the same way. Some curious Greeks want to meet Jesus so they approach Philip. Philip takes them to Andrew who, in turn, takes them to Jesus. While Philip says, "Send them away," Andrew says, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what is that among so many?" It is a boy's lunch after all; the fish don't resemble Moby Dick but rather sardines and the loaves are closer to rolls than footlongs. They are not very much but "not very much" isn't the same as "nothing at all." Andrew has a tiny bit of faith that maybe Jesus can do something with the boy's lunch, but not a lot of faith. Yet not very much faith is not the same as no faith at all. It's the size of a mustard seed and Jesus says even a small amount of faith is able to move the mountain they are sitting on. It may even be enough to feed five thousand. All because a small boy brought his lunch that day. John's gospel is the only one which introduces the little boy as the source of the food. We never learn his name even though his gift is so pivotal. It hardly seems fair we don't know his name. It's like the story about the school custodian who was invited to the county courthouse to testify along with the principal and vice-principal regarding the vandalism of their school. The custodian had been the one to discover the crime. He had spent many hours

scrubbing and cleaning up the mess and when it the day came to testify at the courthouse, he bought a new suit for the occasion. First the bailiff called out, "Send in Mr. Faracci," and the principal went in. A few minutes later, "Send in Mr. Lombardi," and the vice-principal went in. Then the judge called out "Send in the custodian, whatever his name is." Sharing the story, the custodian said, "Now you know why sometimes it's hard to feel that anyone really cares about me around here."

Because of how Jesus deeply cared for and honored children in his life, I imagine he knew the name of the little boy but the scriptures leave that out. Yet that doesn't diminish a small gift from a little boy being blessed by Jesus and becoming a miraculous feast! Note also that when Andrew offered the boy's gift, Jesus doesn't say, "Shh, don't tell anybody; let's keep this food for ourselves as I'm really hungry, and there's only enough for the few of us." The crowd and the little boy would have gone away hungry while Jesus and the disciples would have enjoyed a nice, quiet meal. Instead he tells the crowd to sit and get comfortable, he says a prayer of blessing and gives the loaves to those around him, and then the fish. And there's enough – there's more than enough to nourish a hungry crowd. Many have tried to rationalize this miracle by saying that there were other people that contributed their lunches as well. Humbled by the generosity of the little boy and maybe swayed by the confidence of this Rabbi, they also contributed what they brought. Did it happen that way? The text doesn't say, but the problem is a miracle explained is a miracle explained away. We diminish miracles that go beyond the realities of science when we try to rationalize and control them under the guise of our perception of reality. Miracles are miracles whenever hearts are changed, no matter the circumstance. Whatever happened in the face of that insurmountable task of feeding 5000, it all started with a little boy sharing what he had despite all the present anxieties, fear and scarcity present. It ended with not very much being multiplied into so very much that the gathered church flew to new heights on the wings of God's abundant grace. May we the church learn to fly as well. Amen.