

Bread of Life

John 6:1-15

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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October 9, 2022/18th Sunday After Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, we have a well-known and well-loved story of abundance miraculously emerging out of scarcity.

We have the compassion of Jesus meeting a famished crowd at the end of a long day, with the end result being a lot of full stomachs and piles of leftovers.

Which is probably not a bad description of some of our Thanksgiving meals this weekend!

“A story of abundance miraculously emerging out of scarcity.” I want to pull that sentence apart into two threads this morning.

1. The abundance out of scarcity part
2. The miracle part

On Thanksgiving Sunday, I think we quite naturally focus on abundance. We give thanks for the blessings we enjoy and are encouraged to extend these blessings outward, to the places of scarcity in our world.

This is good and appropriate. It's what we expect to be reminded about on Thanksgiving.

Our worship resources today were provided by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and were designed to be used on World Food Day on October 16 (our worship committee thought they would work well for Thanksgiving).

The core conviction of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (and the reason this organization is so dear to many of our hearts) is that faith must be expressed in action.

On their website, they describe their reason for being like this:

Canadian Foodgrains Bank is rooted in the belief that humankind is created in the image of God and that it is God's desire that no person should go hungry.

The abundance of some *can* and *should* be used to address the scarcity of others.

It is estimated that up to 828 million people are facing hunger worldwide and do not enjoy "food security," meaning they do not have regular access to enough nutritious food to live healthy and active lives.

That's almost twenty-two times the number of people who live in Canada! This is a problem.

It is a duty of faith to share what we have with those in need; it is a duty of faith to learn more about and seek to challenge the injustices around the world that contribute to inequality and poverty.

Organizations like the Canadian Foodgrains Bank are leaning into the challenge. CFGB represent nearly 30 Christian denominations made up of over 12,000 individual congregations across Canada alone. It's a project that many people are eager to support.

In addition, here in Canada, there is the 4:1 matching program with the Canadian government. For every dollar donated by individuals, churches and businesses for food assistance in the developing world, the government of Canada contributes four—up to \$25 million each year.

It's pretty impressive. In strictly pragmatic terms, there are few places where you get that kind of bang for your charitable buck.

Like the story of the boy with the loaves and fish, it is way of taking what we offer and turning it into something much bigger. Human generosity is the way that we move from scarcity to abundance in our world.

Let's move on to the "miracle" part.

Throughout history, particularly over the last several hundred years since the Enlightenment with its elevation of science and reason, many have struggled to believe in the miracles described in the gospels, from the virgin birth to the resurrection and everything in between.

There has been a studious attempt from many earnest, moral, and thoroughly modern interpreters to consign all of the miracle stories in the New Testament to the category of “inspiring metaphor.”

Including this story. Are we really supposed to believe that Jesus broke the laws of physics, and multiplied those loaves and fish? What, did he just snap his fingers and lunch appeared out of the sky?

No, the actual “miracle” is the opening of hearts and the channeling of generosity, such that five thousand people decided, as a result of their encounter with Jesus, to share their food with each other.

The sudden appearance of an abundance of food is explained as the result of people’s decision to share hidden stashes of provisions with their neighbors after being shamed by a young boy’s willingness to give up his loaves and fish.

One might wonder what basis we have for imagining that these stashes of provisions actually existed, but let’s set that aside for the moment.

On this view, the “miracle” Jesus performs is to unleash human generosity.

Now the unleashing of human generosity is indeed no small thing. We are, sad to say, naturally rather selfish creatures and more often than not would prefer to keep what is ours and look out for number one! Sometimes, generosity does indeed seem like a miracle!

But reducing this story to a moral lesson on generosity is to wander down a familiar modern and post-modern dead end: It is to make scripture mostly about us instead of mostly about God.

Interpretations like this one give us far too small a view of God. One commentator summed it up like this:

God is no longer a miracle-worker unbounded by human laws, but a social manipulator who reminds people to share. Behavioral modification replaces amazing grace as the core of the story, and God is reduced to a divine therapist counselling charity among a greedy people who already know better. Can God not be much more in our lives than an omnipresent social worker reminding us of our duties?¹

Well, yes. God indeed *is* much more than a divine therapist or social worker coddling us along to better performances!

And thank God! Because we are in need of much more than behavioural modification.

A God whose actions human beings can explain, a God who is constrained by what human beings find plausible hardly sounds worthy of the name “God.” It is certainly not the God of Christianity.

If we actually believe that God created a world out of nothing and raised Jesus from the dead, multiplying a few loaves and fishes shouldn’t be too much of a stretch.

It is at least somewhat understandable that we would struggle with the miracles in the gospels. It’s not easy to believe in what isn’t part of our normal experience!

But that’s kind of the point. Miracles are departures from the norm. They are rare.

And in the case of the New Testament, they are never just cool tricks that Jesus does because he can; they are signs pointing to his broader identity and mission and to the kingdom he is advancing.

The feeding of the five thousand is one of seven “signs” in John’s gospel.

- Changing Water Into Wine (John 2:1-11)
- Healing the Royal Official's Son (John 4:46-54)
- Healing the paralytic at the pool (John 5:1-18)

¹ Karen Marie Yust, “Pastoral Perspective on John 6:1-21” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 286.

- Feeding over 5,000 with fish and loaves (John 6:1-14)
- Walking on the water (John 6:15-25)
- Healing a man born blind (John 9:1-41)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-46)

Two out of the seven involve providing food and drink (meeting concrete human need). Three are healings (meeting human suffering). One demonstrates Jesus's sovereignty over even creation itself (walking on water). And one reveals his power over death itself.

Together, the signs speak of Jesus' lordship over all of creation, and his promise for this world and for the next.

I suspect many of us in the postmodern, post-Christian, scientific, rational Western world would be glad if Jesus stopped with this world, with feeding the hungry masses on the hillside.

He's meeting a genuine physical human need in a world where far too often far too many people's physical needs go unmet.

This is great, fantastic! This is what religion should be about. Never mind all of that supernatural stuff that people fight about and is impossible to prove anyway! Full stomachs are way harder to argue about than theological speculations!

But Jesus tends not to stop where we think he should.

He goes on, in the same chapter (John 6), to change the subject from physical food to spiritual food.

He says, essentially, "Don't just follow me because you saw me do a cool trick with bread and fish."

Don't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (6:27)

He says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35).

He makes it a bit more uncomfortable for those looking for an inspiring metaphor (and not much more):

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh' (6:48-51).

The people begin to get annoyed. Who is this guy? What on earth is he going on about?

And then Jesus gets downright offensive:

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.' (6:53-57)

At this, even the disciples are starting to back away. Is this some kind of ghastly cannibalism? Who can accept such difficult teaching? Many walked away from Jesus precisely at this point (6:66).

Full stomachs? Awesome. All this weird stuff about eating and drinking Jesus' body and blood and eternal life? Pass.

But Jesus is of course looking ahead to the cross, where he will offer his body and blood for the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the world.

The true bread of life is the crucified and risen Christ.

This is what we celebrated last week during communion. This is why I was so glad to see the display that Annie put together included the cross this Thanksgiving.

It *was* and *remains* an offence to reasonable, rational people looking for reasonable, rational religion. It is "foolishness," according to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:18).

When Jesus fed the crowd physical bread on the hillside, the people wanted to make him king by force; when he started talking about himself as the Bread of Life, they walked away.

It would be a shame if we made the same mistake all these years later, if our interest in Jesus stopped once the cool trick and the moral lesson were over, once he started talking about his flesh and blood being the source of our true and lasting life.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, can we hear both Jesus' call to generosity via his sign of the abundance of the kingdom *and* his call to believe in the one sent as the Bread of Life?

Can we live with open hands, seeking always to do what we can to allow abundance to flow into the places of scarcity in our world *and* with open hearts, hearts that trust in the God who is able to do more than we can ask or even imagine?

None of this is to downplay physical needs. Jesus was human and he entered fully into the human experience. He experienced physical thirst and hunger. Jesus touched bodies, healed bodies, loved bodies.

God cares about embodied human physical life. God cares about food security and economic injustice and poverty. I think the work of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank is dear to our hearts, but God's heart, too.

But Jesus knows that even an impressive lunch on the side of a hill meets only a temporary need, vital though it is.

Near the end of John's gospel, after Jesus has indeed offered his body and blood on the cross for the life of the world, and has been vindicated through resurrection, and has appeared to fearful and bewildered disciples, John the Evangelist writes these words:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

So, this Thanksgiving 2022, may we rejoice and give thanks for the bread and the bounty of this earth which we enjoy.

May we be generous. May we always remember and respond to the truth that “humankind is created in the image of God and that it is God’s desire that no person should go hungry” (CFGB).

May we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Bread of Heaven offered for the life of the world.

May we not, like those disciples in John 6, walk away when Jesus says and does hard things that stretch our imaginations.

May we respond as Peter did, when Jesus said, “And what about you, are you going to leave, too?”

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Amen.

