

Fed By the Spirit
John 6:1-15
July 29, 2018 – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Feeding of the Multitude – it's one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels; and it appears twice in Matthew and Mark. As I've commented before, it probably appears twice in Mark, because Mark emphasizes the inclusiveness of Jesus. What Jesus does on the Jewish side of the lake he also does on the Gentile side of the lake. Indeed Jesus feeds a multitude on both sides of the lake. Matthew keeps both feeding stories; Luke and John feel the need to "clean things up" and eliminate what they consider a redundancy.

Scholars have spent much time on the feeding stories. The man who is originally responsible for turning me on to the excitement of Biblical Studies did his doctoral thesis on the feeding stories. And, of course, the question is always asked: "What really happened?" Those interested in historical facts ask: "Was this really a major miracle? Did five barley loaves and two fish magically multiply in order to serve 5000 people?" Those who would seek a literal interpretation of the text say, "Of course they did, for John calls this a miraculous sign."

Others note that, in the first century, no one would leave home without a bit of food in their pack. Indeed, when I'm traveling, I personally usually have an energy bar, some nuts, and always some water with me. I don't want to get into a food emergency without some healthy eating options available. And so, it's suggested that, when the boy contributed his five loaves and two fish, other opened their pack, thus creating what we could call the first church pot-luck in history.

But let's not worry so much about the history. While I find the history fascinating, I also want to ask, "What does this story say to us today, two thousand years later?" and the first thing I find in this story is a calling. Yes, I preach a lot about call, but that's because I believe that "call" is an absolutely essential element of Christianity. Our Jewish friends and our Muslim friends may be very devout in their worship of God, and I respect them deeply. But only Christians are called to go forth to share the love of God, to transform the world by sharing the love of God. No, I'm not suggesting that we need to convert everyone to Christianity. There are others who would suggest that; I'm not going there. But I do believe that, as Christians, we are call to actively serve all God's people and to love all God's people, and to let all God's people know how very much God loves them.

So Jesus issues a call. He looks at the crowd, and he tells the disciples, "We need to feed the people." Now, I'll say more about the actual feeding next week; but I tell you, I don't think this story is as much about sharing physical bread as it is about sharing love. But Jesus issues a call, "Feed the people." And Philip responds, "Six months wages would not buy enough food to feed all these folks."

Then Andrew chimes in, “Well we have five loves and two fish, but what’s that among all these people.” Now doesn’t that sound like the church? Fortunately, not this church; at least not very often. But how often we hear, “We couldn’t do that. It would cost too much; or, it would be too much work; or, it would take too much time.” But, friends, if we are truly called, God will provide the resources.

Some of you know that, on our mission trip last month, it was my team’s job to rebuild Miss Fanny’s front porch; and I want to tell you, it was a big job for a team of four teenage girls, two of whom were only thirteen. And I could not have been prouder of those four girls. They had a job to do. They pried up the old deck. They sawed new joists. They pounded nails. They finished the decking late Wednesday afternoon. Now it was time to install the railing. So Thursday morning, we went to the Lumber Yard. We decided on some nice white vinyl railing – it looked good, it matched the house, it was low maintenance, it was about the same price as wood, and it should install easily. Thursday was our “recreation day.” That means we only work a half day. By the time we got back to the work site we only got one section of railing installed. The rest would need to be done on Friday, our last day. But that one section looked really good.

Then I looked at the stair railing. It was in relatively good shape. It didn’t *need* to be replaced. But it wasn’t going to look very good next to this nice new vinyl deck railing. Well. . . As the day went on, I continued to think about that railing. Railing is expensive; and the posts – iron cored to make them solid and safe – they were very expensive. So I went to our Mission Trip Director. “John, how are we doing on finances?” I asked. “Well, I think we’re doing okay,” he replied. “John, I want to spend another couple hundred dollars on Miss Fanny’s porch,” I said. “I would not consider leaving that old railing on my house; and I shouldn’t leave it on Miss Fanny’s house either.”

Well, the finances were only part of the problem. We had a lot of railing to install, and only one more day of work. We arrived at the house the next morning and went to work at 9:00 a.m. We finished installing the deck railing at 1:30 p.m. Our schedule had us finishing work at 4:00. I looked at Miss Fanny and said, “Miss Fanny, we’re going to replace your stair rails as well. We’re going to the lumber yard. We’ll be back shortly,” and the thought is going through my head, “You must be crazy. You have two and a half hours to go buy this railing and posts, get back here, and install it with four teenage girls. (Yes, at that point we had two other adults, Wayne and John to help supervise. I don’t want to leave them out of this; but it was the project for our team of four young ladies.) We got back to the house at 2:10, and the girls went to work. One group installed one post, while another group installed the other. Then it was time to install the railing. I picked up a rail to measure it for cutting. I held it between the posts, and I almost fainted. It was exactly the right size. An inch longer and we would have had to

measure and cut all the rails. An inch shorter and we would have had even bigger issues. All we had to do was screw the rails in place – We finished the job at 4:20 p.m. Now, many would say this was all a wonderful coincidence; but I'm not sure I believe in coincidence. Do I believe that God somehow shrunk the rails to exactly fit the opening; no, I'm not sure I can believe that any more than I believe that five loaves of bread magically multiplied; but I do believe that sometimes the Spirit works in strange and very mysterious ways.

And you know what? Not only does that railing make Miss Fanny happy. It's uplifting to the neighborhood. It encouraged neighbors to take care of their property. It was the talk of the neighborhood even before we left. It lets the neighborhood and the church know that there are folks in Cleveland, including four teenage girls that care enough about them to give up a week of their time to come and work hard, to share God's love with them. And perhaps that greatest gift of all was the love that we got to share with Miss Fanny who was present to talk to and to support us most of the time we were working. In a manner of speaking that porch and those rails were the bread – bread shared; love shared; joy shared. I said before, we could not have do this alone; but with God, all things are possible.

Our story of the feeding of the multitude concludes today with the people still not understanding this "God thing." Jesus had seen to it that all were fed. Jesus had met their hunger; and so, they desired to make him king. No, it doesn't work that way. The people are still thinking about earthly things. They are still thinking about the bread in their stomachs rather than the love, the sharing, and the caring in their hearts. And so, Jesus withdrew to the mountain by himself. And that's the last part of our lesson.

We've talked about the calling. We've talked about the sharing, and how God makes that sharing possible. But we also need our quiet time. Back to our mission trip. . . It was Thursday evening – our recreation day; and it was time for devotions. This evening the adult men were supposed to have a devotion prepared; but it was a busy day, and somehow preparing a devotion was just not on our to-do list. So, it came time for devotions, and we all stood and looked at each other. But there was a preacher in the group; and preachers are never short of words. So I stood up, and the Spirit spoke. A scripture came to mind: "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) As you might guess, teenagers are not very good at being still. So I spoke to them, as I speak to all of us now. Take some time, at least a little time, a quiet time to be alone with God, to give thanks for the blessings, to have some rest, and to discern where God might next be calling you. Take time to simply be at peace. Take time to know that God is in control, that God will give us the bread of life, that God will see to our needs. "Be still, and know that I am God," says the psalmist; and, in all things, give God the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Indeed you are the bread of life.

Help us to always put our faith and our trust in you,
for you will nourish our bodies and our souls.

And finally, give us your peace, as we take time,
and in stillness find our rest in you.

Amen.

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