

**Sermon for 7-29-18**  
**Gospel - John 6:1-21**  
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**Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH**

I'm excited - can you tell? - because we're beginning something new today. For the last eight Sundays, our Gospel readings have come from the early chapters of Mark; but today, we begin five weeks moving through a single chapter in the Gospel according to John - the sixth chapter. This is exciting for a preacher whose favorite Gospel is John. No offense to Matthew, Mark, or Luke - I love those guys too! - but in my mind, John is where it's at. In the coming weeks we will delve into some complex, symbolic, and sometimes confusing teachings from our Lord, and I can promise you right from the start that we will not get it completely right -- no one ever does -- but we will do our best to explore Christ's words faithfully, and together we will discern truth for our own lives and for our community.

Today, we've got the miracle of loaves and fishes, the feeding of the five thousand. This is a story about overwhelming need and unexpected provision. It's a story about hunger and absence and scarcity transformed into hope and reassurance and vitality. It's a story that makes no sense, objectively -- five thousand hungry mouths to feed, with five loaves of bread and two fish? Andrew is right when he says "what are they among so many people?"<sup>i</sup> This is some kind of a joke, right? How on earth can we provide nourishment for so many people when we have so little to work with? It's hopeless.

It's hopeless. There's no way. Why even bother?

This could be our story. In fact, this could be the story of the mainline church today, couldn't it? Whether we're talking about Methodists or Lutherans or Presbyterians or Episcopalians or any of the other mainline Protestant churches, this is our story. Times have changed since the glory days of the 1950s. Where we once had an abundance of money and people and resources and influence, we now have a never-ending parade of needs and

worries. We need more people in the pews! We need more pledges, and the pledges we have need to be bigger! We need to reach more young people! We need more paid staff and more volunteers! We need more support from the Diocese! WE NEED MORE!

As Philip says to Jesus, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."<sup>ii</sup>

When the distance between what you see before you and what you think you need is so great, things can seem hopeless. But of course, when Christ is present, nothing is hopeless. With Christ, all things are possible.

So let's take a closer look -- what does Jesus do? How does he manifest abundance in a situation of scarcity?

*"Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets."<sup>iii</sup>*

This is the Gospel according to John; so every word, every detail, is significant.

Jesus begins by telling the people to be seated, and then he gives thanks over the bread and the fish, and shares them with all who hunger. This is the rhythm of our worship, is it not? The Greek verb John uses for what Jesus does when he gives thanks is *eucharistesas*.<sup>iv</sup> This is the essence of Christian worship and practice, this is indeed holy eucharist -- making and celebrating abundance (abundant life, abundant joy, abundant peace) even amidst earthly scarcity.

And Jesus isn't doing magic here, he's not making something out of nothing - he's using resources from within the community (those five loaves and two fish), and demonstrating the truth that whatever God has provided is always enough for God's faithful people. Our Lord reminds us to stop being fearful and skeptical and instead to appreciate that which we already have, and imagine how our provisions might be transformed into abundant blessings.

John makes sure to tell us that "there was a great deal of grass in the place."<sup>v</sup> And why do we care about the grass? The grass is a symbol for John, a reminder of exactly who and what this Jesus is for us - the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Shepherd who feeds his hungry sheep, who nourishes them not just with physical food but also with his words, his body, and his life. When the Good Shepherd is present, the sheep are not left wanting. They are fed and satisfied; they are blessed and renewed.

And what about those leftovers? John makes sure we know that there were twelve baskets full of leftovers from that abundant bread. Jesus tells his friends to gather up the fragments "so that nothing may be lost."<sup>vi</sup> With Christ, the Good Shepherd, nothing is ever lost or wasted. No offering is too small, no person is unwanted or devalued, no gift is pushed aside.

*So that nothing may be lost...* there are twelve baskets of leftovers, one for each disciple. These baskets are a message, an assignment for Christ's closest companions. If they want to serve him, if they seek to do his will and bring his Gospel to its fulfillment, they too will have to feed his sheep. This manifesting of abundance, this holy nourishing, this *eucharistias* will continue after the Good Shepherd himself is gone from our sight -- and we will be the ones feeding and sharing and nourishing, while being nourished at the same time. Those holy leftovers will never run out, if we trust in the Good Shepherd's abundance.

Like I said earlier, this could be our story. We may be tempted to look at the people in the pews, and the pledge income, and the tasks still undone and the needs still unmet and think that the future is hopeless. We're like hardy

little salmon, swimming against a powerful current, and sometimes we don't know which way to go, and it all seems so hard, and we want to give up.

But in those moments of fear and worry and skepticism, we have forgotten just who and what it is that we follow and proclaim - Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of the world, the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the one who transforms scarcity into abundance, the one who brings hope to the hopeless and nourishes the hungry, the one who feeds five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, with plenty left over. It's not magic; it's faithful thanksgiving, and trust in God, and abounding grace.

And if we say to ourselves, 'That's all well and good, but Jesus isn't here right now,' we couldn't be more wrong. Jesus **is** here, he **is** present, here in this place and this time. Jesus is here because we are the church, the Body of Christ in the world. And you are the proof! Whenever and wherever you are being the church, acting as Christ's body in the world, he is there!

When a church member needs expert advice, and another member selflessly offers it without questions or conditions, **Christ is there.**

When church members make phone calls and send notes and prepare meals for those who are sick or in recovery, **Christ is there.**

When a stranger, who looks and sounds and acts just a little bit different, shows up to worship and is welcomed, **Christ is there.**

When a person who feels like she's at the end of her rope comes by the church office and leaves with reassurance and prayer and a sandwich and gas money, **Christ is there.**

When people who have been dismissed or hurt or rejected believe they've finally found a place to belong, **Christ is there.**

When a longtime member offers unsolicited words of encouragement and appreciation to her new and still-very-much-learning priest, **Christ is there.**

And when Bible study participants wrestle with the hard questions of how to speak their truth while respecting the dignity and worth of every person, even (and especially) the ones they cannot understand, **Christ is there.**

Friends, these are all things that happened in the last six days, things that I witnessed here. That's just one week in the life of Christ Church. Let there be no doubt in any of our minds that Christ is indeed present here.

Christ is among us, and where Christ is present, scarcity is transformed into abundance. Where Christ is present, hunger is satisfied. Where Christ is present, blessings abound; and where Christ is present, there is more than enough, and none will be lost. **Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> John 6:9 NRSV

<sup>ii</sup> vs. 7

<sup>iii</sup> vs. 10-13

<sup>iv</sup> from "Enough: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Tenth Week after Pentecost"

<sup>v</sup> vs. 10

<sup>vi</sup> vs. 12