

Sermon – John 6:1-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
10 Pentecost – Year B
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“Fed and Fearless”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The other night, Torsten and I went out for dinner, just the two of us. We rode our bikes to one of our favorite Italian restaurants, and ordered a large slice of pizza to share. He paired his with lemonade; I went with a cabernet. As is the case in such places, the first food brought to our table was a warm loaf of bread. I cut a few slices, and Torsten prepared his in the preferred manner, heavily buttered on both sides – and around the edges, too. But soon, our pizza appeared. The bread was set aside, we ate until we were full, and, having paid the check, we were about to leave. But the gentleman bussing our table looked at our half-eaten loaf of bread, then at me, and asked, “Do you want to take the bread, or should I just throw it away.” Before I could answer, Torsten said, “We want the bread!” The next morning at breakfast, it was eaten, some of it heavily buttered, his paired with milk, mine with coffee.
2. Do you want the bread? Are you hungry? It’s a question like this that compels the crowds to follow Jesus out to that hillside. It’s early in his ministry, and no doubt they aren’t quite sure for what they are looking. But they’re hungry in a way, so they go. Thousands of them. And what follows is so important that it’s recorded in all four of the gospels, so familiar that the story of the loaves and fishes is still known in our era of diminishing biblical literacy. The crowds, in their spiritual hunger, forget to pack a lunch. When physical hunger sets in, the disciples are at a loss; they don’t know what to do. Only

one boy is prepared, his lunchbox filled with fish and barley loaves; perhaps this boy, like mine, liked to eat his bread heavily buttered on both sides. But what is so little food in the midst of so many hungry people? Well, for Jesus, it is enough. He took the boy's food, gave thanks, and gave it to the people. And it wasn't just enough; twelve baskets of fragmented leftovers were gathered up by Jesus' twelve busboys.

3. There is some debate and discussion, scholarly and otherwise, as to what really happened on the hillside that day. In our scientific skepticism, we wonder if such a thing is possible. Some say that the true miracle that day was not that Jesus turned a little food into a lot, but that he convinced people to stop hoarding the food they'd brought and to share it with one another. I'll be honest; I'm going with the miraculous explanation. For one thing, that's where a plain reading of John's words leads us, and he's not alone. Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree. For another, if it weren't miraculous, we'd have to change the name of The Church of Multiplication¹ to something like The Church Where That One Time Jesus Convinced People To Stop Being Selfish Jerks and Share With Each Other. Come to think of it, that's not a bad name for a church, although they'd need a capital campaign to pay for a large enough church sign. More to the point, when you think about it, this is far from the craziest thing we are asked to believe about Jesus. Dismiss this one all you want, but a few verses later, there he goes, walking on water! And did you hear about that time he was dead?!

4. But here's the thing. In this particular instance, it almost doesn't matter. Whether he multiplied the food or got people to share, it was a miracle, the point of which is that *when Jesus shows up, everything changes*. In Jesus' presence, by God's power, empty, outstretched hands are filled; in Jesus' presence, by God's power, closed, clenched fists are opened to share. In Jesus'

¹ The Church built on the site traditionally believed to be the place at which Jesus performed this sign, as referenced earlier in worship during the children's sermon.

presence, the abundance of God's goodness is given to everyone. Perhaps this is why John consistently eschews the word "miracle," preferring instead to call such things "signs," mysterious moments that point beyond themselves to something else. From gift to giver. From bread of barley to Bread of Life.

5. A non-miraculous reading of this story easily lends itself to ethical instruction, which just may be why some folks prefer it. As in, Jesus got them to share, shouldn't we share, too? But the ethical import, or what Christians call the "call," is there regardless. In that restaurant the other night, while Torsten was enthusiastically accepting the bread, I was being silently convicted. No, my decision in that moment would not change the fact that roughly one billion – yup, billion with a b – people would go to bed hungry that night. The conviction came as I was reminded that I live in a world in which my beloved child and I have the choice to walk away from perfectly good bread when other parents with other children, just as beloved and just as valuable to God, have no such option. We think of sin as scandalous and exciting, the sort of "fun" we know we shouldn't have. But sin is usually a lot more boring than that. Often, sin is simply being nonchalantly okay with the suffering of other human beings. Today's sign, or miracle, jars us out of our complacency. Jesus doesn't look out at the crowd and figure out who is worthy of eating lunch that day; he just feeds them. As his church, we are called to do the same for this world. And if Jesus feeds the multitudes in a way that is natural to him, through the creative power to conjure food out of thin air, then all we need to do is feed the multitude in a way that is natural to us. We don't have to multiply the food; we already produce enough. We're just not that good at sharing, at distribution. And that's not good enough. So if you're looking something to do about it, hop online and go to ELCA World Hunger – or another agency – and give a donation. I did this morning, \$50 in honor my dinner buddy, Torsten. It took me less than two minutes. Helping others is so easy these days, you might say it's miraculous. So give. Help out

at a food pantry, maybe at our mission partner, Harmony. As Jesus feeds you with the Bread of Life, unclench your fist and give, that others may live.

6. In so doing, our lives become signs pointing to the thing itself: Jesus Christ, who gives himself away for the sake of the world. On that hillside that day, however it happened, Jesus filled the crowds – with bread and grace and life. On the waters, he declared himself to be, “I AM,” and called them to live fearlessly in the presence of God. Taken together, we see Jesus here pointing to the meal that is to come, the Eucharistic feast in which a little bread and a little wine – “What are they among so many people?” – become a meal big enough to feed the world. Abundant enough that there are leftovers, fragments, broken pieces. Broken pieces of the One broken upon the cross, wasted and thrown away, whose lifeless and entirely finite body would be raised up, alive and with grace infinite enough to feed the multitudes with forgiveness and salvation across all space and time. So come today and receive Jesus as he gives himself to you. Hold out your empty hand, and watch Jesus fill it with gifts that only he can give. Hold out your clenched fist, and let Jesus lovingly uncurl your fingers so that you may release God’s gifts into this world for the sake of all God’s people. Hold out your hands to the One who stretched out his hands on the cross to become the Bread that would feed the world. Do you want to take the bread, or should I just throw it away? Not to get ahead of myself but: “Sir, give us this bread always.” Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.