

Title: Signs of God's New World

Text: John 6:1-14

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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You might find it interesting to know that this story, the feeding of the multitude, appears in all four Gospels. This is one of the few stories that John has in common with the other Gospels. John's version of the story, however, is quite a bit different than the version found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

John's Jesus is great and glorious and often seems to have special divine information. In John's version of the story Jesus knows what he is going to do and he questions Philip in order to test him, who, along with Andrew, seem to be functioning in the story as representatives for the other disciples.

Jesus asks, "Where shall we buy bread for all these people?" In the other Gospels it is the disciples who ask the question; but here in John it is Jesus who asks the question because John wants to make it clear that Jesus is testing their faith. Philip, on behalf of the group, says, "It would take almost a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Philip is pretty good at math and the figures don't add up. He would probably make a good accountant. I am reminded of the story of two balloonists who were lost somewhere over France. When they were finally able to get the balloon close enough to the ground to yell out to a bystander they screamed, "Hey friend, where are we?" The bystander yelled back, "You are in a balloon." With that the balloon ascended once again. The one balloonist turned to the other and said, "He must be accountant. He was accurate; he just wasn't very helpful." Philip's response is accurate, he is a realist after all, but it isn't very helpful.

He sees the gap between the need "out there" and the resources "in here" and responds with a factual, real-world, bottom-line answer: "We just don't have it, Jesus." You may recall from the version of the story that's in the other Gospels that the disciples press Jesus to disperse the crowd so that they can go and buy food for themselves. And that's when Jesus says to them: "You give them something to eat."

Well, Philip knows that they don't have enough money to even make a dent. We, too, have to be realistic about the needs and problems we face. Poverty is a huge problem. According to one calculation about 750 million people will go to bed hungry tonight, that is, if they have a bed. And many of these will be children. It's heartbreaking.

The 191 countries of the United Nations have identified eight key problems which they have pledged to address by 2015. These Millennium Development Goals are as follow: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, Achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and develop a global partnership for development. Immense needs.

So what is one person or one little church to do? The need is so great and the resources so meager. I have to tell you that one of the ways I sidestepped and avoided facing the great needs of our world in my earlier years of ministry was by adopting a very narrow religious view. There was a time when my concern was about heaven and hell, who's in and who's out, who's saved and who's unsaved, who's included and who's excluded. I was enveloped in a dualistic way of looking at life and didn't really give much attention to the great needs of our world. I was looking for Jesus to come back and take me out of the world. What I failed to see was how much "God so loved the world" and continues to love the world. God suffers with the world. Rather than ponder the great need and think of ways to engage this need it was much easier to pass out a gospel tract. (By the way, I got one in the mail this week. No return address. Whoever sent it wrote some Bible verses on the back of it that he or she thought I needed to read. The irony of it is the question on the front: Is your Jesus Who You Think He Is? That's the question I have been asking the evangelical community for several years now. It's amazing how we Christians can have such different understandings of Jesus isn't it?).

Franciscan Priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr puts it this way: "Humans do not want a God of love, because a lover makes demands. That is the very nature of love . . . We seek to hide from it and destroy it. So people sought to destroy Jesus . . . The people did not want relationship; they wanted religion. Should that seem unreal to us? It is the same for us today. It is the same for the Church for the last two thousand years. Humans do not want love relationships; we want religion and all its trappings because that is much more comfortable. A love relationship continues to challenge and make demands . . . It is easier just to go to church."

As long as we keep a narrow focus we don't have to focus on the real issues and problems and needs that love bids us and compels us to confront.

Philip is a realist. He sees the need and it's huge. At this point Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter speaks up. He says, "Here is a boy with five small barely loaves (we should probably put the emphasis on "small") and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Andrew is also a realist, but at least he has a little bit of faith. It's not much, mind you, but it's something. It's small, but it's something. Of course, it's almost as if the faith and hope he expresses in one breath, he takes back in the next: "We have a little

something, but what use is that in light of such a great need?" But you know, brothers and sisters, "not very much" is not the same as "nothing at all."

You may remember that in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus makes a point about having the faith the size of a mustard seed and being able to move mountains. We know that's hyperbole—it's symbolism—it's the language of exaggeration. But it makes a point doesn't it? A little bit of faith can bring about some seemingly impossible results. Jesus himself demonstrated this when "he took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted." Jesus turned "a little" into "an abundance." All the Gospels tell us how much was left over. They don't want us to miss it. They start out with a few pieces and they end up with twelve baskets of leftovers.

What would or could happen if we all gave the little we had to Jesus to be received and given to others? Could we make a difference? What if all the Christians just in this country alone stopped worrying about who's "in" or "out," who's included or excluded and started loving people and caring for people with the little faith we have? What might happen?

Dr. Thomas Long tells about Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City—he says it was a church built in the nineteenth century for silk stocking Christians pulling in in expensive carriages. They're on Madison Avenue. Across the corner is the prestigious Saint Regis Hotel. The entrance to the church is marked by a magnificent Romanesque arch. For years and years some of the homeless in New York City have taken refuge on the porch of the church under the arch. Members of the church had to step over them to get into their worship services. And then one day the church had a conversion, one of those "I once was blind, but now I see" kind of experiences.

The first thing the church did after their conversion was to apply to the city for the right to establish a night shelter. They built ten beds. But there were more than ten homeless people sleeping at the church. So they tried to get them into other shelters. But what they found was that many of the people sleeping on their front porch were what social workers sometimes call "service resistant" homeless. They didn't want to be in a shelter; they wanted to be on the front porch of the church. They were fearful of institutions and leery of authority. They wouldn't go to a shelter. So the church said: "Okay, everyone who sleeps here we will know by name. We will try to know their stories and we will do our best to protect them. When morning comes we will serve them hot coffee and offer showers to those who want them."

That was when the trouble started. On a cold, rainy night in December, the New York City Police Department came with billy-clubs and knocked down the cardboard shelters and drove the homeless off the church porch. The church responded in outrage and protested to the city. The city said, "You're running an illegal shelter and you can't do it." It ended up in court. The city said, "Your charter is a church, this is not your mission." The church

said, “You ask Isaiah and you ask Jesus about our mission.” The judge said, “You’re right,” and ruled for the church. The city appealed. The church won again. The city has appealed four times and it’s still not over.

If you talked to the members of that church they would probably say, “Well, it’s not much really. The need is so great.” But it’s something and I tell you that their ministry to the homeless in that part of New York City is a “sign” of the glory and grace of Jesus. It is a sign of God’s kingdom—a sign of God’s new world.

Maybe what we need is a vision of God’s new world; maybe we need to imagine what that world would look like. Christopher Wren was the architect who designed Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London. One day while it was being built he took a tour of the work site asking the various artisans about their labors. As he left the cathedral, he saw an old man mixing cement in a mortar box. He asked, “What are you doing, sir?” The man, not knowing who it was that asked him said, “Why, I am building a great cathedral.” He wasn’t just mixing cement. He was contributing to a great cathedral. The little we give and offer to Jesus becomes part of the Messianic kingdom, the new world Jesus is ushering in.

As we give we receive. This is how that we too are sustained and nurtured in the spiritual life. In John’s Gospel there is no Passover meal with the disciples and no words of Jesus saying, “This is my body” or “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” That’s not in John. This present passage takes its place.

John tells us that the Jewish Passover festival was near. The Passover celebrated God’s deliverance of God’s people. After God freed them from bondage God led them through the sea into the wilderness. There, on a mountain, they received God’s law and in the wilderness they were miraculously fed with manna from heaven. Here in our story Jesus leads his disciples across the sea of Galilee and he sets down with them on a mountainside. Can you hear echoes of the exodus? Then the crowd comes and what does Jesus do? He takes the loaves, gives thanks, and then distributes to the people. Echoes of what he did at the final meal. Later in the story Jesus will say, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever trusts in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus, himself, is the bread that is broken and given for the life of the world. And as we receive from Jesus and participate in the sharing and dispensing of his love to others our deepest hunger and thirst is satisfied. Christ and his cause in the world constitute the bread for our journey. Each Sunday when we gather in the name of the risen Christ and each time we eat the bread and drink the cup of communion we are reminded that Jesus is our living bread. As we receive and distribute of his mercy, compassion and grace we are sustained and empowered to trust and serve the world he lived and died for.

In the overall scheme of things it may not seem like much—our gifts, our ministries, our service, our compassion, our little tangible expressions of love and kindness—not much in light of the great needs we face. But if this story teaches us anything surely it teaches us that Jesus can use and multiply what little we give in amazing ways. And for those who have eyes to see these expressions of love are signs of God’s reign, signs of God’s new world, signs of eternal life, signs of God’s love and life that Jesus makes available for all people.

Gracious God,

What we have to offer seems so small in light of the great challenges we face. The needs seem overwhelming. But you O God can do much with little. Instill within us enough faith to give what we have to you. To trust you with it and let you do with it as you will.

Multiply these offerings according to your grace. May the love we express and service we render become “signs” of your new world.