

Math Problems

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 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. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. John 6:1-21

Today we begin reading the Gospel according to John, chapter six. And for the next four weeks we will dive deeper into this chapter that will help us better understand who Jesus is. John's Gospel has a different feel to it than the other three. Jesus repeats things over and over. Jesus talks so much in John that if you have one of those red-letter Bibles you can see that most of this Gospel is written in red. Jesus has a lot to say to us and it is our nature to need to hear something more than once, right?

We can probably place ourselves in this story of the Feeding of the 5,000. Are we like Philip? Philip has done the math as any good businessperson would. He has estimated the number of people in the crowd, how many loaves of bread it would take to feed them, the cost of a loaf of bread, and he has calculated that six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get even a little. There's just not enough to go around. Period. There's no point in any further consideration.

Then again, perhaps we are like Andrew. He's a man of action who has been out in the field surveying the options with hope. Even so, he agrees with Philip, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Or maybe, we are like that one boy who, apparently, was the only one who brought a lunch that day. And if we were the boy with the lunch, the only lunch for miles, how willing would we be to share it? Thankfully, he did, and look what Jesus did!

This makes me wonder, though, about the 4,999 others. Could they really have been all that hungry? To walk into the desert with no provisions would have been unwise, and anyone living in the desert would know that. I wonder if they were hungry for something besides food.

So often, this is how we approach life – with calculation and a scarcity mindset, focusing on what is not there, rather than on what we do have. We are unable to see possibility, we have a hard time imagining, and our vision narrows. This can prevent us from recognizing what we are truly hungry for and it can prevent us from seeing Christ in our midst.

This can happen on a wilderness hillside, or even in the church. We see fewer people in the pews, not enough pledges, the building and grounds in need of attention, things not the same as they once were. And yet, Jesus never commanded us to fill the pews, make pledges, own a beautiful worship space, and never change a single bit of all that. No, what Jesus does call us to do is to share the good news, to love our neighbors, to be in relationship with one another, to care for one another, and for all that God has entrusted to us.

When we can only approach life as a math problem to be solved, there will never be enough to go around, never enough to meet basic human needs. Jesus was not asking the disciples to do the math when he asked, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” John even tells us that this was a test for the disciples. Jesus wanted to know what was in their hearts, and if they would trust God to provide for them.

Maybe we can see this as a sort of summer school pop quiz for ourselves. Not a true or false quiz but a word problem, or an essay question. You know, the kind where we need to sit down, and give thanks, and share what God has given us. The kind where we ask what it is that we are really searching for, and what are we really being called to do to bring about the kingdom of God here and now.

When we find ourselves and those around us in need, will we look around with our physical eyes for the worldly resources that are available, or will we look within our hearts? Will we trust that God is with us right where we are and that there is an abundance waiting for us, even if it doesn't look like the meal we are used to seeing on the table?

Jesus feeds the people with bread and fish and the word of God as he teaches them. He has commissioned the disciples, and all of us, to spread this abundance, knowing that there is more than enough. If you are not yet convinced, Jesus has more to say about this, so tune in next week.

There is another character in this story, who is not even mentioned. It's the parent who packed a lunch that morning. Faithfully doing what they did every day to care for their child. I'm sure they later heard the amazing story about what happened to that small lunch, but so many times we may never know how our daily faithfulness is blessed by God to bless others.

Every day we see the 5,000 in our lives– in our relationships, in our life's challenges, in our work, and in our faith community. Do we also see Jesus, who knows that we are hungry for more than perishable food? Do we see Jesus, who will help us gather up the fragments and see that he has already given us everything we need? Amen.