

*Dayenu*

Whitefish UMC

John 6: 1-21; Ephesians 3:14-21

July 26, 2009

- † What's your favorite picnic food? It's a hard choice, isn't it? Having enjoyed and helped prepare three picnic suppers this week, I feel qualified to be an expert. Is it hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, corn on the cob, baked beans, potato salad, or watermelon? (And notice that for someone who is trying hard to eat more healthily, picnic food, except for watermelon which I don't like, is a terrible temptation!)
- † If you've enjoyed a picnic or two lately this summer, it's easy to imagine: tables brimming with good food, mouth-watering smells wafting from the barbeque, sounds of laughter and conversation, and the feeling of a full belly and a fellowship-enriched soul.
- † When the picnic is a potluck, we bring our humble contributions—like that three-bean salad everyone loves—to the event and come away with far more than enough. These simple, often spur-of-the-moment gatherings have a way of offering us glimpses of God's great abundance and a foretaste of God's ever-emerging kingdom.
- † The Gospel reading for this week presents us with a picnic of sorts: John's story of the "feeding of the 5,000" on a mountainside near the Sea of Galilee. It's a most unlikely picnic that defies all human economic sensibility.
- † Why? Because in the story, the poorest of participants (a young boy on his own) offers his meager gifts, and in doing so, helps to unveil God's grace to a world that hungers desperately for it.

- † Through this child's small gift—and mighty acts of stewardship—Jesus reveals great abundance where scarcity was once the only foreseeable reality.
- † Why was this such an important story for the very first Christians? It was so significant that it is repeated six times in the four Gospels. Sure, the details vary a little from Gospel to Gospel. But the story is the same: the crowd was hungry (for bread, for life, for hope); Jesus took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and give it to the disciples to feed the crowd; they ate and all had enough and there were leftovers.
- † Did you know that long before Christians portrayed Jesus in their art or symbolically on the cross, and long before icons were made showing Christ in the robes and royal pose of emperor, early Christians made images of Jesus doing two things: healing and eating...curing the sick and feeding the multitude.
- † These concrete acts of love form the heart of Jesus' story. They are where Jesus' love becomes concrete. Our second scripture for today, continuing from where we left off last week in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, speaks of being rooted and grounded in love.
- † For the first Christians, this was not at all an abstract principle. And the same is true for us, too. Our roots are found in a man who broke bread that hungry hearts and bodies were filled, a man who himself became known as the bread of life in whom ancient hungers are satisfied, a man who when breaking bread said, "This is my body given for you."

- † Love for Christians can never be abstract. It is as concrete as a loaf of bread. And when it becomes simply an abstraction, we lose our true identity and get in lots of trouble.
- † But what I want to talk about today is our tendency to be overwhelmed by the demands for our time, attention, money, patience—you name what you feel is most demanding of you. And then we almost always respond with a feeling or a statement that whatever we have to offer is not enough.
- † And lest you think this is a twenty-first century phenomenon, let's look again at John's gospel story. Jesus and his disciples ascend a mountain (always a sign in the Bible that something big is about to happen). They've probably gone up there for a rest, ironically, but then a huge crowd appears.
- † They come, most of them poor in some way—some are sick and are being carried by relatives and friends. Some are women and children who weren't even counted when counting people was in order in Bible times. Some are poor in spirit and in hope.
- † Jesus realizes that they are hungry for what he has to offer—both spiritually and physically. Jesus knows that there will be a feast of abundance that day, but rather than simply revealing his banquet vision, he invites his disciples to stretch their hearts and minds to envision how such a feast might come about. And we are invited, too.
- † “At least two disciples, Philip and Andrew, respond to Jesus' evocative question in verse 5. Philip performs some quick calculations and arrives at a vision of scarcity. His words may suggest sentiments like: ‘this feeding thing is way too expensive and

- it's definitely not in our budget'; 'we don't have enough resources or volunteers'...;
- † 'there's not enough time—people are hungry now!'; and 'this will be a bad precedence—more and more people will be clamoring after us if we do this.' (Do these words ever ring in our well-intentioned church and Conference committees?)
  - † Andrew goes one step further and looks outside of the 'budget' (so to speak) but finds just one small boy with a meal fit only for a poor person. When Andrew finds this boy and his small gifts, he too arrives at a place of scarcity.
  - † Other than his poverty, we know almost nothing about this boy—the third person to respond to Jesus' question: 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' We don't even know if he is real or figurative. The only other thing we can say about this boy is that his small 'mite' would become a miracle for all, once placed in Jesus' hands.”
  - † Richard Donovan asks “What if the boy were unwilling to share his lunch? What if he were to say, ‘I need this for myself’—or ‘My little bit won't make a difference’?”
  - † But in Jesus' hands, the boy's little bit becomes Eucharist—the Greek word for a thanksgiving feast—that not only satisfies the 5,000 + hungry, but provides food that is left-over!
  - † Jesus transforms the little bit into the more-than-enough. Commentator William Barclay writes, “There would have been one great and shining deed fewer in history if that boy had refused to come or if he had withheld his loaves and fishes. The fact of life is

- that Jesus Christ needs what we can bring Him. We may not have much to bring but He needs what we have.”
- † But I’d go one step further than that. Sometimes it is only out of our poverty—financial, spiritual, or emotional—that Jesus can transform us. Isn’t it only when we’re at the end of our proverbial rope that we turn to him? Not always, on our good days, but often.
  - † It’s to those who have no ability to pull themselves up by their spiritual bootstraps to whom God provides rich wine and more than enough living bread. The disciples main mistake is that they have no idea what they have. Namely that they have a God who can feed many on nothing.
  - † One writer says, “A God who created the universe out of nothing, that can put flesh on the nothing of dry bones, that can put life in the nothingness of a dry womb, NOTHING is God’s favorite material to work with.
  - † Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as ‘nothing’ ‘insignificant’ ‘worthless’ and says, ‘Ha! Now that I can do something with!’”
  - † How many times have we faced the same situation that the disciples faced? We see so many members of God’s good creation clamoring for sustenance and help; we know that God promises abundance; so how can we help with our little bit of nothing—our overwhelmed selves and schedules and money?
  - † Will we respond only with careful calculations like Philip? With a limited and self-defeating fundraising-like campaign like Andrew? With words like, “Well I need this for myself” or “My little bit won’t make a difference?”

- † I have a confession to make (seems like I've been doing a lot of that lately!). When I first heard about Jody and Suellyn's need for \$24,000 up front by August 4 for the air ambulance this week, I thought "They'll never raise that much so quickly."
- † But I was thinking like Philip. Since then, after hearing the amazing stories of a young acolyte in the Browning church setting up a lemonade stand with his sister, of a local pastor at course of study in Wesley Seminary in Washington, D. C. standing up during chapel service and collecting \$340, of our church pledging without hesitation at least \$1000, I believe that I was wrong. (Imagine that!!)
- † Apparently I needed to hear—no to live—the blessed doxology from today's reading from Ephesians: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."
- † Aren't those beautiful words and sentiments? You bet. But do we believe them? A wise rabbi was once asked by a student: "Rabbi, did God really part the Red Sea?" "Yes" the rabbi answered. "Just again this morning he parted the sea of doubt and despair so that I could face this day."
- † A friend sent me this poem by the famed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman. He is well-known for beginning each of his classes with a prayer, and last year some of his prayers were published. This prayer/poem is called "Giver, Giver, Giver."
- † Creator, giver of goodness,  
 creator of all that is,  
*dayenu*\*\* -- loaves abound!

Redeemer, giver of new creation Spirit, multiplier of loaves

We are children of your bounty,

daughters and sons of privilege

We live amidst ample food, ample clothes,  
ample housing, ample cars, ample stereos,  
ample friends, ample security.

We have ample and count on it,  
reckoning our luxuries to be necessities.

And we are grateful.

In our gratitude,

we notice the war refugees...;

we notice the war on poverty,

even with our government surpluses;

we notice our ample housing

along with 20,000 in Atlanta on the streets;

we notice how you grace our church

midst our fear and rage and cunning;

we wonder about our grades

and our worth and our honor;

we ask about inheriting eternal life

and turn away with our great possessions.

Giver, Giver, Giver who overrides fear in utterance

who overrides scarcity in abundance

who overrides parsimony in generosity,

we are among the 5,000

we are dazzled by twelve baskets left.

Our gratitude does not match your generosity,  
but we are grateful  
For all your gifts including the gift of your very own life to us,  
We give you thanks. Amen.

- † As an Old Testament scholar, Brueggeman would have used that strange word, “dayenu” with ease and familiarity. Dayenu is a traditional Passover song of deep gratitude. In Hebrew the word dayenu means “It would have been enough for us.”
- † The Passover song begins, “If God had only brought us out of Egypt it would have been enough”; the second verse adds, “If God had only given us the Torah of Truth, it would have been enough”; then continues on for thirteen verses of the same refrain.
- † “Dayenu.” It would have been enough. What God offers is more than enough. God offers God’s very self—love poured out abundantly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It’s not just an abstraction but a concrete and present reality.
- † How? When we offer what we have, in God’s love and in our gratitude, it is more than enough. Dayenu. Amen.

Sources:

“Grace and Gratitude,” weekly email reflection from Rev. Bill Mullette-Bauer

<http://sarcasticlutheran.typepad.com>