

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 10.7.2018



## Tables of Welcome

By the Reverend Pen Peery

John 6:1-14

We continue in our sermon series around the theme of Welcome. We've connected this sermon series to our fall stewardship effort – and I want to remind you that this wraps up next week: we'll have a congregation-wide brunch at 10:00 in the Wood Fellowship Hall, followed by one service at 11:00 where you (and your kids) are asked to bring your pledge card, and then will spill out into the church and the community for a day of service. We're not just talking about stewardship – we are also living it. All ages have things they can help us do. And – yes – you are encouraged to show up next week casual!

What I hope you will take from this sermon series and your invitation to participate in our stewardship effort is that what you give – whatever the amount – helps us to reflect God's welcome to our neighbors, our city, and our world. Our financial support helps equip our members share God's welcome, it helps this building be a place of God's welcome, it helps our programs and our mission express God's welcome.

And in a world where so many – of us, and our neighbors – feel isolated and alone...perhaps even wondering if the good news of the gospel and the love of God are for them...being a place of welcome is incredibly important.

Today our second scripture is an account of the feeding of the 5,000.

Listen with me for the word of the Lord.

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After this 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 towards 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.’

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The gospels are full of stories about Jesus’ miracles.

Walking on water. Water into wine. Washing a leper clean. Restoring sight to the blind...

But there is only one miracle that shows up in all four of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It’s this story of Jesus feeding the 5,000.

Each of the gospel writers tells it a bit differently.

Matthew says there were 5000 men, plus women and children.

Some gospels say it was seven loaves and few fish.

In Mark, it actually happens twice...first Jesus feeds 5000 and a little while later he feeds 5000 more.

John’s account, the one we just heard, is distinctive because it is chock full of details.

John is most clear about where the feeding took place: on the other side of the Sea of Galilee...which, if that’s where you lived, was called the Sea of Tiberias because Tiberias is where King Herod set up his new capital.

John is careful to note that it would take a fortune to feed so many people – six months’ wages would hardly cover it.

Only in John do we learn that the food that Jesus multiplied came from a little boy.

From John, we learn that the loaves were barley.

That there was a good deal of grass where Jesus told the crowd to sit.

And that afterwards, when the disciples collected the leftovers, there were twelve baskets full.

The reason scholars think that John includes all of these little details is not because he wants to prove his story to be true, but because he wants to make the point that when God acts in



the world – when Jesus performs his miracles – he does so in the midst of the everyday...in and among the stuff that we so often take for granted...in the messy, ordinary, non-miraculous aspects of our lives. That’s where God shows up – in the ordinary.

I don’t necessarily think that just because the feeding of the 5000 shows up four different times it means that it is the most important miracle, but I do find it interesting that it was the only miracle all four gospel writers thought it was important enough to include in the story they told about who Jesus was and why Jesus mattered.

Miracles are funny things.

Sometimes they embarrass us.

I’ve mentioned the Jefferson Bible before...it’s a lot smaller than the Bible you have in your pews. Thomas Jefferson was a man of reason, and while he said he believed in God, he thought it might be more believable if he cut out all the parts of the Bible that just couldn’t be true because they were too supernatural. So he went to work – and there was a lot of material on the cutting room floor, including this story about the feeding of the 5000.

Other times, miracles frustrate us.

Who hasn’t wondered – especially when faced with a situation that felt helpless – why miracles had to stop? Why God had to discriminate with the restoring sight the blind, or the raising of the dead, or the healing of the sick – helping some, but not others...a few, but not all?

The gospel of John describes these amazing things that Jesus does as signs – not miracles. It’s an important distinction. Bible scholar Gail O’Day says “what matters to the gospel of John isn’t really the miracle itself...what matters to John is that to which the miracle points.” In John’s gospel Jesus performs seven different signs (including the feeding of the 5000) that reveal him to be the Light of the word, the Word made flesh, the Lamb of God. And at the end of the story we heard today, if you paid attention to the details, that’s what the people begin to notice...the sign pointed to Jesus who was “indeed the prophet who has come into the world.”

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Maybe it is because this story about Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes is so familiar, or maybe it is just because I have been watching and reading too much news recently and wringing my hands over the state of things, but as I have sat with this Scripture this week and thought about how to bring you good news, what feels miraculous to me isn’t the multiplication. This week I have found myself thinking about the crowd.

The crowd followed Jesus because they had seen him in action – they had heard him preach,



watched him heal, witnessed his ministry. But I have this tendency to forget that, even in Jesus' time, those who followed him reflected the same splinters and divisions within their community as people who follow Jesus in our time do.

In that crowd of 5000 who sat on the grassy hill were people with different opinions, with different allegiances, and different world-views.

After all, some of the old-timers in the crowd called the lake they sat beside the Sea of Galilee. Others, who were more loyal to the new regime, called it the Sea of Tiberias.

Some in the crowd were likely from the commercially successful fishing villages along the lake. Today, we might call them "coastal elites." Others were from the more remote parts of the hill country.

Some in the crowd Pharisees, others were Saduccees, others must have been Essenes. These are but a few of the special interest groups within the culture of Judaism at the time of Jesus.

There were certainly people in the crowd who held different hopes for what Jesus represented: some wanted him to bring revolution, others peace, others thought Jesus hearkened back to a better, more simple time.

We know something about living amidst a crowd who represent all of these competing allegiances and loyalties, don't we?

And, at least this week, what seems miraculous to me is that a crowd like that was all hungry for the same thing

- the food that Jesus provided
- and I find it amazing that once he had fed them
- that **whole** crowd
- with all of their difference
- was satisfied.

I wonder what it would be like today.

If Jesus showed up and gathered 5000 people together to sit down in a grassy place. Not just random people – but people who followed Jesus – who believed in his name.

What would we see reflected?

What kind of loyalties would be at play? What allegiances? What world-views?

What would those people be hungry for?

And do you think a group like that, in our time, could ever be satisfied?

All of them?



In her new book, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and The Fate of Nations*, Yale law professor Amy Chua articulates a disturbing trend that I think we all feel pulling at the threads of the fabric that holds this country together – it is move beyond, even, partisanship, to something more deeply rooted, more emotional, more divided: tribalism. Chua believes that as human beings we are inherently tribal – and that the success of the American experiment is that we have – so far, by and large – managed to restrain our instinct to look after our own group, to draw bright lines that separate us from them. At our best, Chua writes, we are a country who aspires to be nation where loyalty to ideals and principles

Hungry for healing, justice, wholeness.

Not satisfied with 1 in 3 women suffering from sexual assault.

With racism.

With the casual ways we treat intimacy.

Don't look for a political party.

Don't look for a platform.

There isn't a better place to be satisfied than at this table.

This is where you are welcome.

This is where you will be fed.

When we practice that kind of welcome at this table we point to the one who is the Light of the world.

