
“A Fantastic Feast”

A SERMON on John 6:1-21 for the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B¹
Preached 25 July 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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“Nobody in the world eats better than the bereaved Southerner.”² At least this is the claim that Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays make in this wonderful little book I found some number of years ago titled *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral*. “In the Delta,” they go on to say, “we ask not for whom the bell tolls—it tolls for all of us, and the message we hear is ‘Open a can of Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup and get busy.’ ‘When somebody dies, I may not know them well enough to go to the house or attend the funeral, ... but I can always take the family a ... casserole.’”³

The book includes a host of recipes for everything from tomato aspic to green pea casserole to chocolate chess pie. But the real treasure is its dry but very funny look at the ins-and-outs of funeral customs in a small middle-class white community in the Mississippi Delta. “People in the Delta look better dead, whether in their coffins or obituaries,”⁴ they write. “We don’t believe you have to have won a Nobel Prize to get a good obituary. A glowing obituary is practically a birthright.”⁵

One of my favorite chapters is entitled “The Methodist Ladies vs. the Episcopal Ladies.” In this chapter, which if it were set here in Canada would, of course, have been “The United Church Ladies vs. the Anglican Church Ladies,” they compare and contrast the usual sort of cuisine served at their town’s two main congregations—First Methodist and St. James’ Episcopal—along with the relative classiness with which it is served. More than that, though, they also admonish you to think about your mourners’ needs upon your own passing: “If you feel your family will be so devastated by your departure that they’ll require the solace of strong drink, join St. James’. Immediately.” (The Methodists, after all, are teetotalers, at least publicly.)

The book talks about coffins, cemeteries, hosting visitors from out-of-town, and even music choices. The bit about music includes both a list entitled “For the Well-Bred Dead Person” with items like “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “For All the Saints,” and “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, as well as one tellingly titled “Being Dead *Doesn’t* Mean You Have Good Taste”. (I suspect each of us have our own ideas of what should be on *that* list.)

Throughout it all, though, somehow the authors keep coming back to the food: Whether the reception’s at the church or at the home... whether you need a little post-reception reception to have a “restorative cocktail”... or two... or six...(!)... Or even if, perhaps, the grieving family got a little *too* carried away with those cocktails the day *before* the funeral, and in their altered state ransacked through all of the food except the desserts, and thus the reception plans have to change... In any event, food is a big deal in these moments.

I imagine that we know that ourselves here at this church, too, of course. As it turns out, it’s not just a “Southern thing” to provide well for the waistline in our times of mourning. I’ve served on the staff of churches in the upper Midwest, in the middle Atlantic region, and in the

¹ This sermon is based on and adapted from a sermon I had previously preached on Matthew 14:13-21 (Matthew’s version of the story of the Feeding of the 5,000) on 2 August 2020 at Storrs Congregational Church UCC in Storrs, Connecticut.

² Gayden Metcalfe & Charlotte Hays, *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral* (Miramax Books, 2005), 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 143–4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*

heart of New England, and while I've never seen any tomato aspic, the various funeral receptions teams at those churches do a phenomenal job. There was *never* a reception that lacked enough food. And while I've not been here very long yet and the pandemic has thus far put limits on our in-person gatherings, I nevertheless know that here at Cloverdale United, our own UCW team likewise makes themselves available to host such receptions, as well. It's a gracious ministry of hospitality and compassion, a real gift and treasure.

Honestly, that doesn't surprise me *all* that much. After all, people in general, even in their brokenness, they're giving and helpful and compassionate most of the time. "I want to do something... what can I do? How can I help?" People are always asking these sorts of questions following tragedies and as they reach out to friends in the wake of a loss or transition. If anything, people usually lament that they can't do *more*, that what they *can* do seems like such a pittance in the face of someone's grief or in comparison to some other person's generosity and service. People fear that what they *do* have and what they *can* do, that it's not enough. '*All I can do* is bake some cookies. *All I can do* is make some sandwiches. *All I can do* is send a card, or make a phone call, or give a hug... surely that's nothing in the face of what's happened. Surely that's not enough.'

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"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish," Andrew said.⁶ "But what are they among so many people?"⁷ Surely that's not enough. Look at all these people... there must be thousands of them. And we've been out here all day with you, Jesus, curing and healing and caring.⁸ But what we have to offer now—just five loaves and two fish—surely that's not enough... is it?

Of course, we have now heard the story, and we know how it ends. The crowds were fed, with 12 baskets left over. A lot of thought has been 'thought,' and a lot of ink has been spilled, over just how this so-called "sign"⁹ might have happened. If you have spent much time in more liberal-leaning churches, like this one, you've perhaps even heard someone basically explain away the story, saying that what happened wasn't some scientifically-impossible physical multiplication, but that the real 'miracle' was one of human sharing: the offering up of those initial five loaves and two fish was the inspiration needed to open the backpacks and satchels—and most importantly, the hearts—of the crowds, so that *all* shared what they had with their neighbors. Could that be the case? Sure, although even the most learned and liberal-leaning of biblical scholars will admit that such an explanation is *probably stretching* beyond what the gospel writers had in mind. The gospel writers probably had in mind to show Jesus' power, and his purpose to use that power in the service of the undersides of society... the ordinary people, not the powerful.

But the honest truth about this story, this scene of the feeding of the multitudes that stands as the only miracle story we find in all four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, *and* John... the truth is, we don't know just how exactly it happened. And we certainly don't know how to do it ourselves. As noted preacher Patrick J. Willson notes, "The disciples say, this is all we have, we don't have enough. They're right of course. We don't have enough. The church doesn't have enough to feed them. Whatever it was Jesus did with five loaves and [two] fish, we don't know

⁶ John 6:9, NRSV.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Where the Gospel of John places the Feeding of the 5,000 does not explicitly indicate this; this imagined detail is interpolated from the setting of this story in the synoptics.

⁹ The synoptics refer to a "miracle"; the gospel of John refers to Jesus' various "signs".

how to do that. We don't know how to do *that* miracle."¹⁰ After all, if we did, by now we'd have ended all hunger and poverty, certainly among the people within our own church communities and perhaps even among everyone all around the world the world. Alas, we don't know how to do that miracle, *however* it was that Jesus managed to do it.

But "what we *do* know and what we *do* have is this story."¹¹

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Famed Jewish writer and Nobel Peace Prize awardee Elie Wiesel reminds us, though, that *the story itself* may be enough. Wiesel himself tells a story about stories like this:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would to go the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.¹²

The truth is, we *can* tell the story, we *can* make the phone call, we *can* bake the cookies and make the sandwiches. None of it is *enough*, it would seem. And yet, somehow, it does end up being sufficient.

And even more, my friends, Jesus is able to make sufficient even in the midst of grief and fear and despair. When the gospel of Matthew tells its version of the Feeding of the 5,000m it begins with a mysterious line: "Now when Jesus heard *this*, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."¹³ The "this" that Jesus had just heard was that his cousin and forerunner in ministry, John the Baptist, had been killed by Herod the king. And the more Herod heard about Jesus' ministry, the more Herod wondered if somehow Jesus was John returned from the dead. So, whether it was grief over John's death or fear for his own safety and continued ministry, either way, Jesus just wants to get away. And yet, in the middle of grief and fear, still Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion for them anyway. Perhaps that's as much the miracle in the story as anything else, the thing that seems so unexpected and even perhaps impossible. If the stories of Jesus miracles serve to reveal something about the character of God, then this miracle might just be that even when God's own self is grieving and under attack, still God has

¹⁰ Patrick J. Willson, "The Hunger", sermon on Matthew 14:13-21, reprinted in *Lectionary Homiletics* 25:5 (August – September 2014), p. 8. Emphasis and correction added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹² Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), frontispiece; quoted by Patrick J. Wilson, "The Hunger", sermon on Matthew 14:13-21, reprinted in *Lectionary Homiletics* 25:5 (August – September 2014), p. 8.

¹³ Matthew 14:13, NRSV; emphasis added.

compassion, still God is willing and able to reach out to heal and to feed.

Really, when you think about it, that's the central strategy of our faith that we enact every time we gather as the Christian church, the people who gather not at an altar in a temple but rather around a meal table in a meeting house. Even in the midst of our grief, our doubt, our fear, our questions of whether any of what we do is ever enough, still we come and "we place our not-enoughness on the table and deliver it into the hands of" Jesus. And he "takes our not-enoughness, and blesses it, and breaks it up, and gives it around, and behold: a miracle. People are fed. Acknowledging our hunger and knowing our not-enoughness, we come before God, and our hunger and our not-enoughness are transformed into a holy offering and an invitation to a feast."¹⁴ And all of this happens in the midst of a place, a people, a world, and even a God that are just as filled with grief and sorrow as they were yesterday and will be tomorrow.

But that's *exactly* where such miracles tend to happen, isn't it?

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According to one of the personalities populating Metcalfe's and Hays's book about Southern funerals, "If you don't get at least one caramel cake when you die in the Delta, ... somebody doesn't love you." Well, I'm sorry to say that the next time we celebrate the feast that makes us who we are as church, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, we won't be slicing up any caramel cake here at the communion table.

But then again, this is *not* a funeral. Rather quite the opposite: *whenever* we gather as church, and *especially* whenever we gather to celebrate "the feast that frees us,"¹⁵ it is a preparation for life, a training on what life in the world looks like with Jesus here to bless and break and give. So hear the story, my friends, and taste and see that indeed, even without a caramel cake, somebody *does* love you... very much!

¹⁴ Original source of these quotations is unknown. It could be the Patrick J. Willson source cited earlier, but I do not remember.

¹⁵ Marty Haugen, "Let us Build a House (All Are Welcome)", vs. 3; ©1994 GIA Publications, Inc. In *More Voices* (©2007 The United Church of Canada), #1, and many other hymnals and songbooks.