

**“Radical Hospitality”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode**  
**The Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**July 26, 2009**  
**Scripture: John 6:1-21**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Here we come to you, Lord Jesus, once again wanting you to be everything we think you need us to be. Yet it is Sunday, the Lord’s Day, the day when you meet us and show us your glory. Come Lord Jesus, reveal yourself to us as you are, not as we would have you to be. Amen.*

Writer Adele Hooker remembers a point when she and her family were going through some really hard times. They had very little to eat, but one day her husband unexpectedly asked some friends over for dinner. Adele was dumbfounded:” There was no food in the house! How could she possibly feed guests? So she went into her bedroom, knelt down and asked God what she could do. As she prayed, she seemed to hear a voice telling her, “You have meat in the freezer.” Right – a half pound of hamburger. That wouldn’t go very far. Then she heard, “You have vegetables.” One carrot, half an onion, and two stunted potatoes for six people – not very likely. But the voice told her to make a stew, and to use the rest of her flour to make biscuits. Adele still didn’t think that there would be enough, but she would try. She would serve the stew to her guests while she and her husband would only eat biscuits and milk.

But that night when the stew was passed around, there was plenty. There was even enough for seconds. And afterwards, when her guests had thanked her for the delicious meal, there were actually leftovers.

Doesn’t that sound familiar? Doesn’t it remind you of the words we just heard from John’s gospel?

The feeding of the 5000 is a story with which you are all familiar. It was the time of the Passover and all the relatives were in town for the holidays. You know, kind of like our Christmas

or Thanksgiving. All your relatives or friends come home to celebrate the holidays together or maybe you are the one who travels to be with them. Inevitably you go out shopping together and if something special is in town you want to make sure to take everyone to see it – the best live Nativity Scene, the house in the neighborhood which always has the best light display.

At the time of the Passover in this story, who do you think the people wanted to check out? Of course, that would have been Jesus. Who was this Jesus who could heal people, make the blind see, the lame walk, and the deaf hear? After teaching and healing most of the day, Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias because the city of Tiberias sits on a hill which slopes down to the lake. Jesus was tired and hungry after teaching all morning. He traveled to the top of the hill and sat down to relax with his disciples when he noticed that the crowd had followed him.

You see, when the people saw Jesus go up the mountain that day, it reminded them of Moses going up the mountain to commune with God. They remembered that when Moses had come down from the mountain, he had carried the Ten Commandments. In the same way, the people expected some kind of miracle from Jesus. So they followed him.

Jesus knew how he and the twelve felt – tired and hungry! As he looked out at the crowd watching them slowly make their way up the hill, he knew how they felt, too. Jesus turned to Philip and asked him a question to see how far Philip had grown in his faith. Often teachers test their students to see how they would handle a situation.

Jesus used the same technique, “Hey Philip, how are we going to feed all of these people?” I’m sure that the rest of the disciples heard the question, too, because two different disciples try to answer the question. Philip replies, “There is no way we can feed this crowd! Six months wages wouldn’t even buy enough bread for each of them to get a taste!” Philip closes the subject with no hope, whatsoever. Andrew, on the other hand, offers a little hope.

It’s been correctly assessed that there is no way they can buy what they need, so what does Andrew do? Rather than concentrate on what they don’t have, he concentrates on what they do have. There’s a young boy here, he tells Jesus, with five barley loaves and two fishes, not a lot to try and feed so many. I can almost picture the gleam in Jesus’ eye at that point. The first answer was, “There is no way we can do anything.” The second answer was, “Well this is what we have, but what can we do with it?”

It’s like the story of a little girl in Milwaukee who had had her tonsils out and was staying with her grandmother while her parents were at work. One day she complained of a sore throat. “I have some holy water from Lourdes that I got from my mother,” the grandmother said. “Should I put some on your neck?”

The little girl thought about it for a minute and then asked, “What’s the expiration date on it?”

Such skepticism. But unfortunately, that’s how most people deal with miracles. Not even the disciples thought in terms of the miraculous. They had forgotten who it was who was with them. Jesus probably smiled sadly at the disciples and their skepticism. And then he showed them what he can do with what “little” they have. He took the small amount of bread and fish that they had from the boy, held them up toward heaven and gave thanks to God. Then he distributed them. You know what happened then – everyone had plenty to eat and there were even left-overs.

You know – one of the fascinating things about Jesus and the Bible is that they are both very much alive. Jesus is still organizing. God is still blessing, and the Holy Spirit is still enacting in the lives of people today. This story challenges our church today. God knows, not only what our needs, wants, and desires are, but also the needs, wants, and desires of those within our church’s reach.

The test question for our church is, “How will the physical and spiritual bread of life be given so that the people inside and outside the

church walls will be able to eat?” How will we answer Jesus? “Lord, we don’t have millions of dollars to spend to provide for all the ministries which or needed,” or “Lord, I freely offer you the gift of writing, teaching, crafting, computing, carpentry, taking care of kids, visiting, talking on the phone, praying, math, building, gardening, typing, or a myriad of other gifts which God has given you.” We can assess the needs of our community. We can organize the gift each person volunteers to give, for everyone has at least one gift to offer. We can ask God’s blessing on those gifts we have and go out to accomplish what God calls us to do.

The feeding of the 5000 is one of many stories in both the Old and New Testaments where something small was given over to God and blessed, and whether it be loaves and fish, or time in a day, or oil in a lamp, or oil in a jar, God blessed it and provided something great from it. In this story, a young man offered five loaves of bread and two small fish and a miracle occurred.

The feeding of the 5000 was an important incident in the life of the church. Each of the gospel writers mentions the event at least once. When the early church was struggling, they remembered fondly the time when Jesus fed the crowd. They viewed themselves as ones who were taking their small beginnings, their few loaves, and distributing them to the entire world, offering hope to the hopeless, and performing a great miracle of faith.

Miracles are possible, my friends. They occur every day. But we must give of ourselves in order for a miracle to occur; they don’t just happen. The miracle in which God most delights is when we share Christ with the world.

One of the lessons Christ tried to teach us was that God provides for us with radical hospitality. He sets before us a table in the midst of our enemies – he fills our cup to overflowing. He is the one, who when wine was needed at the wedding feast, tells us to fill water pots to the brim. He is the one who, when the prodigal son returned home, killed the fatted calf and threw a big party.

God’s abundance – God’s radical hospitality – goes far beyond just providing for our daily needs. In some wonderful words from the Prophet Isaiah, God reassured his people, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare...Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”

Jesus is not offering the people food. He is offering us himself. He is offering all the power and promise of God in the flesh. And he is offering us the opportunity to show radical hospitality. The bread of life is to be kept, and it is to be given away. The bread which Christ gives us provides us with great strength and power and love and grace, all of which we are to share with people inside and outside of this community of faith. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to King Duncan for his sermon, “Lord, What a Bountiful God!”, Abington Commentary on John 6:1-15, King Duncan for his sermon, “Missing the Real Miracle” and his sermon, “The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread”, and his sermon, “All You need is a Miracle”, Deborah J. Spink for her sermon, “Jesus, the Ultimate Organizer, Environmentalist, Economizer, and Believer.”*

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