

Abundant Life
Pentecost 12
August 3, 2008
Matthew 14: 13-21

God Provides

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Consider how many celebrations and family gatherings are centered around food. When someone gets married, you have a meal. When someone dies, you have a meal. When there's a birthday, a holiday, or even just a nice weekend, you invite friends and family over for a BBQ. There's something about sharing food together that makes every event just a little better. Food gives us an excuse to linger and talk. It's a basic building block for human relationships. I love the line, "It's hard to stay mad at someone very long once you've had dinner with their kids." Of course, maybe that depends on whose kids they are, but the point is that food has power, and I have noticed that at Abundant Life we always hang around church a little longer when there's food.

Of course, we were not the first to realize that everything goes better with food. Our lesson this morning from Matthew is the story of the greatest church picnic of all time! The so-called feeding of the 5,000 was really more like 10,000 because, as you may remember, the "official" count did not include women or children in the statistics. It is a great story, but it didn't start out that way. As our passage opens, Jesus has just heard that his cousin John was murdered by King Herod. The Lord's plan is to go off by himself to grieve and to pray, but it doesn't happen. Even now, there is ministry to be done. Thousands of people follow our Lord, and the deserted place is not so deserted anymore. So Jesus spends the day healing their broken bodies and tending to their souls with preaching and teaching. The day

grows late, and Jesus figures that a great day like this is just not complete without breaking bread together. So, miraculously, the Son of God whips up a light supper for everyone around, and then comes the best line in the story: "and all ate and were filled." This is not just the junk food appetizer that we eat before we get the "real stuff." This meal satisfied the people in a way that they did not expect.

I love the incredible sense of God's abundance that runs through the entire passage. Even on a day when Jesus has got to be feeling totally drained and empty, even on a day when he must have been tempted to pull the covers over his head and shut the world out, even then he finds that he has more than enough to give to the starving crowds. But then, God's abundance is a major theme in the New Testament. Remember the time when Jesus was invited to a wedding and the wine ran out? our Lord turned some water into wine as a wedding gift for the young couple, but not just a little wine. Jesus made 180 gallons of the best-tasting vino you ever had! Then there's the story that Jesus tells about the original Good Samaritan who finds a guy who has been mugged out in the boonies. He takes the stranger to the local urgent care center, hands the ER doc his own checkbook and credit cards, and says, if his care costs any more than this, just bill it to me. Of course, there is that parenting story we all like where the spoiled teenager goes and blows the entire family fortune on drugs and women, and then his father welcomes him back with open arms. And what about that Bible verse that's also from Luke 15 that says that there will be a party in heaven for every single sinner in the world who repents? I bet the Almighty could run up a heck of a tab for noise makers and ice doing that! The point is that extravagance is hard-wired into God's DNA. God is always giving you and me more than we deserve, more than we need, more than we could ever use up in a lifetime, Jesus is a God of abundance.

His disciples, on the other hand, are from a different planet, literally. Scarcity is the name of the game in our world. So when Jesus' tells his students, "You give them something to eat," They are stunned and don't have the foggiest idea what to do. They say what any one of us would say, "We have nothing to feed all these people with!" But when Peter and the guys say that they have nothing, that's not quite true, is it? What they have is five loaves and two fish. It's just that the disciples assume that these paltry resources are hardly worth mentioning in the face of such a gargantuan task. We do the same thing all the time. In churches, when the Council President stands up and pleads for someone to fill the latest vacancy on the church board, we say that we have nothing to give, and likewise, when the Chair of the Stewardship Committee says that the church is behind budget and asks folks to dig a little deeper, we say that we have nothing to give. But we don't really mean that we have "nothing" to give. What we mean to say is either that we're not willing to let go of what we have or that what we have is of so little value that nobody would want it in the first place, and both of those excuses are a sin. Let's unpack them for a moment.

I know full well that this is not a wealthy congregation, and few of us are sitting on a whole lot of extra time or money, but to hold back what we have, in any measure, is not God's way. Like it or not you and I serve a God who is a spendthrift., a God who refuses to pinch pennies, and a God who will not worry about going in the red. As children of our Heavenly Father, you and I are supposed to follow in our Daddy's footsteps and let go of everything that we have. After all, we are just temporary renters of our time, our money, and our bodies, anyway.

Just as being stingy is a sin, so is undervaluing what we have. When you say that you're not good enough to serve God or that your offering is too small to make a difference, not only are you making light of what the Lord himself gave you, but you are also depriving

God of the raw materials for a miracle. Remember, the feeding of the 5,000 started with five dried out crusts of bread and two puny fish! Friends, Jesus can do miracles, but your job and mine is to give the Lord something good to work with.

The Rev. Alan Kimber was once the pastor of Westfall United Methodist Church in Durban, South Africa. He says that at the time there were two classrooms in the township with 500 kids going to school in two sessions, 8 a.m. to noon, and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. The children were poor. Many had no shoes. And the classes sometimes took place under the shelter of trees. The kids had a hard time learning. They were often hungry, and it soon became apparent that in order to facilitate learning, the church was going to have to feed these children. When the problem was addressed one Sunday morning, Pastor Kimber said, "You give them something to eat." The congregation said that they had nothing to give - except one man said he had \$5. Then another person said he had \$10. That day, that poor, little church collected \$2,000 on the spot and began to feed those children.

Matthew wants you and me to understand that participating in Jesus' miracles is a holy enterprise. We should not miss the Communion language used at this huge church picnic. The text says that before everyone ate, Jesus blessed, broke, and gave the food at hand. These are powerful words meant to guide our whole lives. To offer a blessing over something is to give thanks for it, but it's also pronouncing God's presence in and through the whole event. You and I need to do a much better job of bringing God into the ordinary. Whether it's a meal of hotdogs and potato chips or a gathering of Christians for worship on one of the umpteenth Sundays after Pentecost, we need to remember that God is here. Every good thing in our lives is worthy of God's blessing. So Jesus blessed even that ridiculously small amount of food. Next, he broke it because when you break something, you multiply it and get it ready for distribution. The most effective church volunteers are the

ones who go out and find others to work with them. Maybe my little idea isn't much, but together with your idea and his idea and hers, we can be a mighty force. Just as Jesus broke the bread so that more people could share it, the church must always be in the multiplying business. And finally, of course, Jesus gave his meal to the people. This is a reminder to all Christians that the focus of our ministry is always someone else. We do not build a building, hold a worship service, or teach a class for ourselves. We do all of those things and more to give away the love of God that we have already been given, and when we do that, we find that, like the loaves and the fishes, we have more than we started with. See, Holy Communion is a missional sacrament. There is always room at God's table for one more, and everyone who eats at God's table is called to share what they have been given. Blessed, broke, and gave are good words for ministry and great words to live by.

It all comes down to whether we are going to be people of reason or people of miracles. Reasonable people believe in scarcity. People of miracles believe in abundance. It is certainly reasonable for the disciples to balk when Jesus tells them to feed the crowds. You can't possibly feed 5,000, let alone 10,000, people with such a small amount of food, but God can. Albert Einstein once said, "The way I see it you have two ways to live your life: the one as if no miracles exist and the other as though everything is a miracle." To be a Christian means to build your life on the foundation that nothing is impossible for God. Reasonable people say that people have too much to do to come out on summer weekends. Christians hold worship services all year long. Reasonable people say that money is tight, and we need to look out for our own. Christians take an offering every Sunday and fill food pantries for hungry people. Reasonable people say "trust only what you can see," but Christians pray everyday. Reasonable people say that dead is dead, is dead, but Christians celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday. The story in front of us is not a reasonable

story, but it is a wonderful, powerful story of God's generosity and excess, and because You and I have been fed countless times by God's unreasonable miracles, Jesus calls us to faith and trust when he sums up the entire ministry of the church with these words, "You give them something to eat!"

Amen