

"Who Shall Supply the Bread?"

Matthew 6:25-33
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John 6:1-13
St. James UCC

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You may have heard of the carnival performer who was a strong man. One part of his act was to squeeze an orange with his weaker left hand. With just that one hand he could squeeze the orange until it seemed to be all squeezed out. But then he'd do one better. He'd toss that seemingly juiceless orange to his stronger right hand. With his right hand he would squeeze it some more and more juice would flow from that flattened orange. Finally he would open his hand and show that lifeless pulp to the crowd. They could see that this orange had had it. They were all very much impressed at how well the strong man had with one hand at a time juiced that orange for all it was worth. Then the strong man would ask the crowd for a volunteer. "Five dollars to whoever can come up here and use both hands and squeeze five more drops out of this orange."

The crowds were convinced. He never got anyone to take up his offer, until one day when, to the amusement of the crowd, a small be-spectacled man raised his hand to take the challenge. The strong man smiled as he bid the little man to step up. The volunteer took the orange and gave it a good squeeze. Jaws dropped and people gasped as they watched juice flow from the orange. They had been sure that the orange was dry.

The now respectful strong man said, "How did you learn to do that?!" The little man's answer, "Well, I have been a church officer for 32 years and on the Stewardship & Finance Committee most of those years. I've been in charge of raising money for the support of the church."

I tell you this story, not just because it makes a point, but because there's a similar story in the Bible. The product here is bread and fish instead of orange juice, and the central figures are not carnival characters, but they are Jesus, the Disciples and a little, nameless boy.

Here is Jesus - He'd had a hard day, filled with the constant drain of His energy by the throngs of people who were after what He had to give: healing, inspiration, and life. They people had come to this normally quiet spot out in the countryside, by the Sea of Galilee just to be near this famous, healing, helpful man. It was late in the day. Time to eat. The Disciples came up to Jesus with the problem. "Lord, we have thousands of people here. 5,000 men, plus thousands more women and children. We're talking about a major crowd - and a major problem. These people need food. They are wondering what to do. There is no food."

Jesus knew better. He knew there was more juice to the orange. He put it to Philip first. Philip was a faithful disciples - yet here was Jesus testing the faithful-testing Philip. "Philip, where can we buy enough food for these people?" Philip was immediately protective of their bank account. "Lord, do you know how much of our money it would take to provide supper for all these people? Besides, we're out here in the countryside, none of the little stores around here would have anywhere near enough bread to sell."

Now a miracle began to happen. Juice was about to flow from the empty orange. Another Disciple, Andrew, stepped forward with a little joke. It was a ridiculous joke. "Lord, I have a little kid here who has a couple of fish and five loaves of bread he is willing to share." You can almost hear Andrew following those words by saying, "Just kidding! Just kidding!" Obviously five loaves and two fish are not enough to begin feeding even the first row of the crowd, but then Jesus says, "We can go with that. Tell the people to sit down - let's eat."

What follows is a miracle of amazing proportions. Anyone who thinks that Jesus will point his finger at the bread or wave his arms over it and say some magic words doesn't understand the way Jesus worked. Back in the early days of his ministry, despite the Devil's blatant temptations, Jesus made a hard-and-fast decision to not appeal to people through magic. He refused to turn stones into bread, even though He easily could have. He would not win by carnival tricks. He made a commitment to change the world by changing the hearts of people, which when you get right down to it, is probably the most difficult miracle of all.

Jesus knew something that the Disciples would have known had they been thinking. No one in that time traveled away from home without making some provision for food and beverage. Jesus knew full well that under the flowing garments and in the baskets people carried there would be food and drink, but nobody wanted to bring it out for fear others had forgotten and they would have to share. And if Jesus could be talked into providing a good spread that would be all the better - then the people could keep their own private food supplies. Jesus knew that otherwise fine people, people who loved to receive what Jesus could do for them, were still pretty hard hearted and self-serving. The miracle for the day was not the healing of the paralyzed man which had taken place earlier. The miracle for the day was to open up the hearts and the spirits and the purses of these people.

So, Jesus let a little child lead them. When Jesus gave thanks for the loaves and the fish and then began to pass them around, something began to happen. People began to open up and offer their food. Everyone had plenty to eat and there were piles of leftovers

In our text from Matthew, Jesus tells us not to worry about food and drink or clothes. God knows our needs and will provide. Jesus speaks these words to us because He knows that we worry excessively about our physical needs. We are constantly planning, shopping, deciding how we'll get that next dress or what we'll eat for dinner or if we have enough money in the bank to do something that we want to do. Those issues consume much of our energy and our very life.

Yet as we come to the Lord's table. We are reminded of a very different example. Jesus not only didn't worry about issues like those, Jesus not only freely shared whatever He had, but Jesus freely gave even His very life for us. He loves us so much that He gave us the gift of life without holding anything back, with no reservations whatsoever.

As we share together in the bread which symbolizes the Body of Christ, think about that symbol. The body, the physical being. Jesus gave unstintingly of His possessions and then willingly and knowingly sacrificed His very body for us.

As we drink the cup, remember that it symbolizes the blood of Christ. Now blood is a physical part of the body. But it's a part that we normally don't see, for the blood flows inside a person. Yet the blood carries those things the individual cells need for life. It gives life to the innermost parts of the body. In this wondrous gift we are reminded of the importance of what is inside, of the unseen, of the very spirit or soul of a person. Jesus gave freely of His very Spirit that our lives might be touched and changed. Jesus worried constantly about what is inside us, for He knew that too often our focus is only on what is outside. We worry about what we have or what we want in order to be comfortable, instead of letting our soul speak about what we need to give and how we need to love and to serve.

The hardest job Jesus had to do, the hardest job that Jesus still tackles every day is to open up the hearts and spirits of those who believe in Him and follow Him! We hold on. He asks, "who will supply the bread?" We would like someone else to do it. We cling to what we have, and we would like others to think that there is no more that we can give - no more time, no more money, no more commitment. But there is!

As we gather around the Table of the Lord, let us remember together the one who gave everything that we might know life, that we might experience God's love and forgiveness. Jesus didn't say, I can't give anymore, He said to God, "Not mine, but thine will be done." Let us gather around the table of the Lord not reluctantly or holding back, but as those who are ready to follow in the steps of Christ. Let us gather as those who are committed to loving and serving and giving because we know that God has loved and served and given to us, and we are grateful.

Amen.