

## ***“You Feed Them ...”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
May 2, 2021 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Text: John 6:1-15

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of John is an account of what is arguably the most well known of all of the miracles performed by Jesus, the Feeding of the 5000. Since this is a Communion Sunday, it makes sense that this miracle, grounded in the basic human need for food, be our focal point. After all, a Communion Sunday is the time each month when we gather around Christ’s Table to celebrate Jesus as we nourish ourselves on bread and juice both physically and spiritually. And in this church it is a time when we remind ourselves to look for the Risen Christ in the faces of people around us.

Food was always at the heart of Jesus’ ministry and his interactions with people. Reading through the Gospels we encounter story after story of Jesus breaking bread with the people he was trying to reach, even going so far as inviting himself to their homes for a meal as he did with Zacchaeus. He dined with friends like Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus and with the families of his disciples as in the story about his coming to Peter’s home for a meal which Peter’s mother-in-law made for them, after Jesus healed her of a fever. Jesus even got himself invited to dinner in the homes of the religious leadership who were opposed to his work, knowing that the intimacy of sharing a meal with someone in their own home has a way of breaking down barriers.

Food and shared meals were indeed central to Jesus and how he interacted with people. That’s why, on one level, this miracle of the Feeding of 5000 people is really no surprise. What is remarkable about it is how it happened and what it tells us not only about Jesus, but also about Jesus’ expectations of us. We should note that this miracle appears in all four Gospels, the only miracle, aside from the Empty Tomb, which does. All four versions of this miracle are remarkably similar. John’s version, however, has one interesting detail that Matthew, Mark and Luke do not contain. Those three versions talk about meager portion of loaves and fish but not where they came from leaving us to wonder, did only one of the

disciples remember to pack a lunch? Or was this all that was left of the food they had packed for themselves at their last pit stop? In Matthew, Mark and Luke we just do not know where the food came from. John, on the other hand, does have a specific explanation of the origin of the loaves and fishes – a young boy had provided them. But, we don't know if he approached the disciple Andrew when he realized the disciples were scrambling for food and offered to share or if Andrew saw his food and approached him.

I like to think the young boy heard what Jesus told the disciples when they came to ask him to send the crowd on their way. I like to think the boy heard Jesus say to the disciples, "you feed them." I can imagine him listening intently as Philip explained to Jesus, "Six months' wages would not be enough for all of them to get even a little." That's when I imagine the boy, so moved by Jesus and his concern for all the people, approaching Andrew and shyly offering the little bit of food he had. If we listen closely between the lines of the text we can almost hear the boy saying, "I know it's not much but I will gladly share." Not wanting to dismiss the boy out of hand, Andrew takes the food to Jesus, the boy following. "There is a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus, sees the boy and smiles as he tells the disciples to "make the people sit down." Then he gave thanks to God for the bread and the fish and began to pass the food out among the people. And the meager rations never ran out.

Did the baskets of food never empty because God kept miraculously refilling them for Jesus? Did the people there suddenly begin sharing their own food just like the boy had? We don't know and we don't need to know because either way, it was a miracle. Frankly, I think selfish people suddenly willing to share their food with strangers is a bigger miracle than a *deus ex machina* solution where God just keeps refilling the baskets, but, really, it doesn't matter. What matters is that hungry people were fed when it seemed like there was no possible way that was going to happen. A miracle is a miracle is a miracle. As evening came on and everyone was finally leaving the grassy hillside, I imagine the boy running back home, bursting into the house to share what he had seen and experienced that day. I'm thinking he was met with some incredulous stares from his brothers

and sisters, and perhaps even his parents. But his grandmother, sitting on her chair by the fire, just smiled at him and says, “now even God knows what a fine boy you are.”

So, what does this miracle story have to say to us at this point in our lives as our Covid induced lifestyle changes are slowly reversing and we are left to ponder the open-ended question, “now what?” What are we supposed to do as the CDC rules seem to change daily and the state health departments and governors’ offices scramble to keep up? Honestly, it’s difficult to know for sure, isn’t it? Can we relax wearing masks outside or not? Just with other vaccinated people or with everyone? Is it safe to travel? What about eating at a restaurant or having drinks in a bar? How safe is it to come to worship and, when we’re here, can we sing together or not? If not, when will we be able to? Who has the answers we need and how can we know they are reliable? The questions keep coming at us as fast as the pandemic seems to be receding because that threat of another surge is just not going away, as much as we want it to. It seems like we have more questions than anyone has answers and how can we possibly move forward if that’s the case? What the heck are we supposed to do?

I think that’s pretty much how the disciples felt when they came to Jesus after a long day of watching him heal and teach the ever-growing throngs of people. They knew they were out in the middle of nowhere and if these people were going to get to a place where they could buy food, they needed to get moving now! I’m sure when they expressed their concerns to Jesus about the people needing to leave to find food the last thing they expected Jesus to say to them was, “you feed them.” What? He did not just say that to us. Not even Jesus would say something that crazy! Jesus, don’t you understand how much money it would take to buy food for all these people? And where would we find it anyway? No village around here has that much food to sell? ... What? Well, yes, then I guess that does mean that sending the people away wouldn’t solve the problem of feeding them. But, Jesus what are we supposed to do? Now what?

You feed them. That’s what Jesus said to the disciples who urged him to send the people away. You feed them. They are hungry. They need food. You feed them. Like it was that simple. It’s never that simple! Or is it? Jesus thought it was and Jesus showed the disciples how to make it happen.

He got the people seated, thanked God for the food and started handing it out. And he ran out of people before he ran out of food. You feed them. A challenge to do the impossible that became proof that it was possible. Why did that happen? Why does any miracle happen? Because somebody somewhere believes it's possible. These kinds of miracles are around us every day if we stop to look for them. This tarp flapping over our magnificent cross window is such a miracle. Gary told the Trustees and myself as much when he reported on the window repairs at our meeting this past week. When the glass fitters started to work they discovered the wooden framework on the exterior of the cross window was completely rotted away. Standing right in front of the window as the wind blew, Gary said he could see the cross bowing in the wind. Yet through all the storms we've had, the glass never blew out. The cross held it in place. That, dear ones, is a miracle. It wasn't a feeding people kind of miracle, but it was a miracle nonetheless because no one could explain how that window kept from blowing out. It should not have been possible. But it held until the right people got up there to discover the damage and figure out how to move forward. Gary says he had his own "now what" moment in the midst of it all but then he thought to call Asael Hill and Ase called his son Alan and we were on the way to a solution. It will take a couple weeks to be completely repaired but disaster was averted! Thank you, Jesus!

Dear ones, as we are moving forward out of this Covid Pandemic and the havoc it has made of our lives, our health system and our economy, we are faced with a major "now what" moment that stretches across every aspect of our society and indeed the entire world. And I would suggest our best way forward is just to approach this moment like Jesus told the disciples told to do when faced with 5000 hungry people. "You feed them." Just do it. Trust that you can do it, take one step at a time, one decision at a time, one problem at a time and just do it. The good news is – and there is good news here – we now have a very clear idea of all the things that are wrong in our country and in our world that need fixing. Like a giant tsunami that slammed into the entire world all at once, the Covid pandemic has stripped bare any pretense we have had as a nation about how much in control we are of the problems that plague us – inequities in housing and health care, lack of a living wage for the people performing essential work

like cashiers in grocery stores and retailers, like housekeeping folks in hospitals and nursing homes who have to work two and three jobs to make ends meet, like all those working 50 hours a week and still needing food stamps and food pantries. Our illusions of the white colonial suburban American dream house have been ripped to shreds as the rot behind the façade has been finally become visible to everyone. The rot of systemic racism, an educational system that benefits some but still leaves far too many behind, and the sad fact of the huge numbers of children living in poverty despite having parents who work are no longer hidden. And all this, dear ones, is good news. How can that be, you ask? Because if we can't see the problems and acknowledge that they are real, we can not possibly fix them. If we refuse to see the hungry, the poor and the disadvantaged people right here in our own community, we will never be able to respond to them as Jesus commands – YOU feed them.

You feed them. Dear ones, that “you” is us – you and me. Is Jesus asking us to feed 5000 people right here and now out of our own pockets? No. But he is asking us to see that people are hungry, that people are homeless, that people are sick in body, mind and spirit and that all these people need our help. But how can we help, you ask? We can't give enough money to the church to solve all these problems! That's right. You can't. But you can pay attention and stay informed about what's happening in your own community. You can speak up about injustice you see. You can vote. You can call your local and state and national legislators and urge them to address these problems. You can use your voice to cry out for change and to pray for strength for all of us for the work that lies ahead. And, of course, you can do what you can to support our donation drives here at church. Because the simple truth is, what we do – whatever it is, however big or small – really does make a real difference in the lives of real people. The disciples learned that first-hand when 5000 were fed right in front of them. What will it take for you to believe that even you can make a difference? How will you respond when Jesus says to you, “you feed them?” Will you say, “Gosh, Jesus, get real!”? Or will you say, “just show me what to do, Jesus. I'm with you.” The choice, dear ones, is, as always – yours. Amen.