

How Is That Possible?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 6, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
Text: John 6:1-14

I think it's safe to say as we sit here together this morning that we will all be very glad when the elections on Tuesday are behind us, if for no other reason than we will finally be able to escape the universally horrible political ads. We are all weary of the mudslinging and the fear-mongering. We're tired of the sea of political yard signs spoiling our usually friendly neighborhood vistas. We're just sick and tired of all the unrelenting negativity coming at us from all sides, and no wonder. Ever since the January 6 insurrection, the angst about our beloved country and the trajectory it appears to be on has become palpable. Even local politics has become fraught with folks taking sides heatedly about everything from school library books to proposed affordable housing units to planned development, or over-development as some claim. Let's face it, most days life is just one big anxiety attack waiting to happen. Or at least it feels that way. So, the question becomes for us, here in this church at least, where is God in the middle of all this?

The obvious answer, the one which gets me through each day, is my firm belief that God is right in the middle of it. Somehow, some way God is in the middle, working God's purposes out even as we humans keep mucking it up. How do I know this? Because I know our God is a God who acts in history. The stories of both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures make that clear. The God who freed the captive Israelites out of Egypt and led them to freedom with a pillar of flame by night and a pillar of cloud by day is a God alive in history, totally aware of the

people's plight. The God who spoke through the prophets like Isaiah who reminds us that God is always about to do a new thing, or Jeremiah who tells us to trust that God always has a plan for us to have a future filled with hope is a God alive in history, thousands of years ago and still today. The God who walked with Jesus every day of his earthly ministry, empowering Jesus to heal the sick in body, mind and spirit is a God who pays attention to the suffering of his beloved. This very same God, our God, is the God who is with us as we face into these midterm elections coming up this Tuesday. The very same elections which have been hyped by the media to a point of frenzy – whether this is actually helpful or not – are taking place within God's time, within God's awareness, as part of God's unfolding history of humankind.

The particular Bible story we read this morning – the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 from the Gospel of John – is one story which speaks to this whole idea of our God as a God alive in history – all of history – the past, the present and the future. How is that possible, you might be wondering. Excellent question! To ponder it we need to delve a little deeper into this story we think we know so well. For instance, you may or may not know that this story is one of the few miracle stories which appears in all four Gospels. It is remarkably similar in all four Gospels except that only John's story includes the little boy who shared his lunch with the disciples. Matthew, Mark and Luke just have the bread showing up in the hands of the disciples who bring it to Jesus. Only John traces its origins back to one little boy. This in itself is a fascinating detail. Who is this boy and why did he offer to share his lunch? Did Philip and Andrew see that he had food and

approach him or did he hear Jesus asking the disciples about food and step up to volunteer his? We just don't know. He was just there, his simple lunch of five barley loaves and two fish in hand.

I always imagine Jesus walking up to the boy, after he learns about the boy's food that he is willing to share and kneeling down to speak with him. Whatever he said we don't know because the text just skips right from the disciples telling Jesus about the food to Jesus barking orders to tell the people to sit down. That just doesn't seem very much like Jesus to me. He would not ignore the little boy. I imagine him gesturing to the little boy to stand next to him as he lifted the food up to God for a blessing, then remaining as the disciples got the people organized so that the feeding of them all could begin.

The organizational strategy for this miracle is also quite interesting to me. Jesus clearly had a plan in mind for how this was going to work. Breaking the people into smaller groups was part of that plan. But why? Did Jesus suspect the people would all rush together, charging the food distributors like wild animals? Perhaps. Certainly, any of us who have worked at soup kitchens know there can be quite a rush when the food lines first open and it can be scary! After all, even the Sunday Friendship Breakfast at Matthewson Street Church in downtown Providence, which some of us visited during our Mission Trip several years ago, remember that they had a very large bouncer like guy standing right where the food line began. But, again, being worried about a hungry crowd being too aggressive just doesn't sound like Jesus. So, why the smaller groups? Well, maybe Jesus figured the little boy wasn't the only one who brought his lunch that day. Out of all those thousands of people could it really be the case that this little

boy was the only one who thought to bring food? I doubt it. But, he was the only one brave enough to offer his food to Jesus to share with everyone else. Maybe Jesus thought if he broke the people into smaller groups, it would be easier for everyone else to share what they brought as the people sat down to eat together. Maybe, just maybe, the miracle here is not that five loaves and two fish stretched to feed 5000. Maybe the miracle is that one boy, combined with the blessings and ingenuity of Jesus, made all those people share with each other when that had never been the plan. Let's face it. That would be just as big a miracle as the loaves and fish just multiplying. Maybe even bigger, since we all know getting people to share when they hadn't planned on sharing is no easy feat.

Echoes of this feeding of the 5000 miracle story rattle around every stewardship campaign any church does. That's because church budgets count on miracles more than any self-respecting Trustee or Treasurer ever wants to admit. Then again, they know better than most that church budgets are not like other budgets. They are not like business budgets where profit and loss and stockholder returns are a primary concern. They are a little more similar to family budgets in that we need to cover the basic costs of shelter, of having a place to be church. And churches are not like most other kinds of non-profits who count on wealthy benefactors or low overheads to get our tasks done. No, the church is its own unique financial world in so many respects and, to me, that world resembles nothing else so much as it does loaves and fishes. Why? Because we trust that our projected budget income – like pledges, and special project incomes, and investment incomes – will come in as hoped for but churches, the

fiscally responsible ones at least, never lose sight of the fact that we build an entire year's worth of life in the church based on loaves and fishes. We know what we can count on for income, sort of, and we hope we know what the expenses will be. That's the loaves and fishes part. We also know that there is bound to be bumps in the road on both sides of that equation. When the stock market struggles, our investment income is down. When folks move away or die or lose their jobs, pledge income goes down. And the special projects income is always a mixture of blood, sweat, tears and a lot of crossed fingers that the money needed will be what we raise. And once we make our way through these rough patches we never know when something will happen to some new part of the roof, or one of the boilers gets hinky or ... well, you get the picture. Loaves and fishes time. Every day. Prayers to God for the blessings we need just when we need them. Prayers answered. God alive in history – our history – every day.

Loaves and fishes. A small boy shares his lunch and inspires other people to share what they have. Everyone has a great feast and a wonderful time. And there are plenty of leftovers for everybody. If that doesn't sound like church, I don't know what does. But I do know this. The world outside our doors needs the love and the commitment we here in this church work so hard to offer to everyone. Our neighbors need to see our rainbow flags flying in our gardens when a few try to say those same flags have no place in schools. Did you know we actually received some thank you messages on Facebook for our flags during the recent flap in the Stonington schools? Well, we did. God alive in our history, right here and right now.

As we prepare for the Bazaar, we should celebrate God alive in history right here in the midst of gift baskets and wall to wall goodies, offering our community the fun and affordable Christmas shopping experiences that our Bazaar is famous for. People who are hurting in so many ways, who might be too afraid to come through our doors for whatever reason, are still assured we are here for them, if only through our Facebook worship broadcasts and our Facebook posts. Dear ones, make no mistake. We are, quite literally, in the loaves and fishes business. We are in the hope business. We are the living proof every day that our God is alive in history through us. Never forget that the hope we offer, the prayers we offer on behalf of so many each week, do make a real difference in so many lives. This church matters to this community. It matters to each and every one of you, and to so many more you may never even meet. This I know to be true. My prayer this day is that you realize it too so that we can keep moving forward together into the future God has in mind for us, in this community, in this church, and in each of our lives. May God continue to guide our footsteps forward into God's future each day. Amen.