

What's in the Basket?

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 23, 2024 – Thanksgiving Sunday
Text: John 6:1-14

“What’s in the basket?” That’s a question some of us have heard a lot in the past few weeks, especially on bazaar Saturdays. “What’s in the basket,” Lynn and helpers heard in the baskets area, almost sold out after the first two bazaars! I guess it’s safe to assume the right things were in all those baskets!!! Those of us bringing baked goods in for the bake area could also have been greeted with this question from our fellow bakers, although most of us brought them in via box and bag. Again, our baked goods stock was so rapidly depleted last week that it was mostly sold out before noon! The pace was slightly slower yesterday but still ... Never seen anything like it before.

What’s in the basket? As we consider the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday this week, I’m imagining that might also have been a question the Pilgrims of Plymouth asked the Native Americans who arrived to share food with the starving colonists in that first settlement in New England. This mythologized scene is the foundation of our own Thanksgiving holiday to be celebrated in our homes this week, but I can’t help also remembering how the kindness of these First Peoples ended with their almost total destruction within two years by the very people they tried to help. We like to gloss over that part. Don’t get me wrong, I love Thanksgiving and what it represents, at least in theory, as much as the next person. But I also can’t forget that our celebration is built in part on the backs of suffering. A good reminder that celebrations devoted to giving thanks to God must always include petitions for forgiveness for those moments when we are not our best selves. Funny how those moments always seem to be part of holiday celebrations these days. This year especially, as our country is divided to a dangerous degree, we need to pause for more than a minute of grace to thank God for all the blessings we still enjoy. We need to

invite God into this fraught moment to ease our anxieties so that we can find the way forward, whatever our respective “baskets” might hold.

You may not realize it but “what’s in the basket” is a question central to one of the most well-known and beloved stories in the Bible. Often called the story of the loaves and fishes, it relates the time when Jesus made two fishes and five barley loaves stretch to feed 5000 who had gathered to encounter Jesus. The people were following Jesus as he and the disciples traveled throughout the countryside. They wanted to be healed but also to learn more about this entirely new way to understand God that Jesus taught. They wanted to know about this father-like God Jesus knew and loved. They wanted to experience having a relationship with a God offering unconditional love instead of judgment. These people were so hungry for the good news of Jesus they literally could not get enough and thus followed him everywhere, hanging on his every word. On this particular day they were so totally immersed in what Jesus was saying that everyone lost track of time and, before you knew it, stomachs were rumbling as time for the evening meal approached.

This is where the story gets interesting because the four Gospel versions of this story are surprisingly different on a few key points. This is one of the few stories about Jesus which appears in all four Gospels, but John’s version of this story contains details that the other three do not. For example, in John’s Gospel it’s Jesus who approaches the disciples – Philip – to be precise – and expresses his concern about the people getting hungry. A reasonable enough concern for Jesus to express, given the circumstances, but this is not how the story is told in the other Gospels. In all three of them – Matthew, Mark and Luke – it is the disciples who come to Jesus to ask him to send the people away because it was getting late, and they needed to find food before it got dark. This is a very curious difference. Why does John have Jesus raise the question of feeding the crowd with the disciples

when the other three don't? And notice how Jesus poses the question in John – “where are we to *buy bread?*” Bible scholars suggest that Jesus poses this question in John to set up the disciples for his instructions to the disciples to feed the people. He knows what he is asking of them is impossible, as the disciples quickly tell him. But that doesn't let them off the hook. Jesus expects the people to be fed.

This is where the two versions of this miracle story really diverge. They both have Jesus instructing the disciples to get the people organized and sitting down. Then Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes and has the disciples start distributing them to the people. John, though, inserts a little detail here that the other gospels don't. John tells us where the loaves and fishes come from – a boy's lunch. But even John does not tell us how the disciples came to know about the little boy's lunch or that he was willing to share it. Did the boy realize there was an emerging food issue and offer up his lunch? Or did Andrew, the disciple who told Jesus about the boy and his lunch, see the boy with his basket, thinking it might contain food and so asking him, “what's in the basket?” We don't know, but either possibility seems equally probable. It does raise the question, though, of whose empathy was aroused first. Was it the boy who saw the need and asked Andrew if he could help? Or was it Andrew who saw the boy's lunch basket and sensed a possibility? We don't know. We never will. But the question still intrigues. Where did the kindness originate? More importantly for us to consider, does it matter how it came to be or that it is? This is for us to decide for ourselves, apparently.

This question of “what's in the basket?” feels especially relevant to us this Thanksgiving when anxiety on so many fronts threaten to overwhelm us. We're still figuring out how to process all the ramifications of the recent election results. We're wondering what the future holds for us as individuals and for this, our beloved church when so many other issues in the world are so scary. Climate change, the threats of war and disease and even civil unrest – so many reasons

to feel uneasy and anxious about life. So many worries to put in our baskets. And it's so easy to put them there, isn't it. That's why today, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, I want us to "hit pause" on our worries for a few minutes so we can make room in our heads and our hearts to think about how we would answer the question "what's in the basket?" What do our baskets we are carrying into Thanksgiving, metaphorically if not physically, contain? What blessings do they hold? What fears? What might it look like to intentionally take those fears out of your basket for just one day – Thanksgiving –and focus on the blessings, on the joys, on the possibilities, on the hope and light God promises to us always? How big is your basket anyway? What does it look like? Is it old and worn revealing its age yet still able to hold so much? Is it a newer one, made from plastic-like filaments, reflecting the light in all directions? Once you have some sort of image of your basket, I invite you then to ponder a question or two. Then I'm going to ask you to find someone to chat with to talk about what's in your basket and why it's in there as Thanksgiving approaches. Here are your questions:

- 1) What blessing in your life are you most aware of in this moment? Why?
- 2) How is God present for you in that blessing?

Got it? Understand the task? Okay then. Let's go. ...

Pause for conversations

Thank you for that. I hope you enjoyed your conversations. I invite you to bring your hopefully refilled, brimming full baskets of gratitude, hope, possibility and love with you into the rest of this week and right into the Thanksgiving holiday. And whatever that day holds for you, may God fill you with so much love, hope and light that it radiates through you to everyone you encounter. Amen.