

Family Picnic!

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 23, 2025 – A Conversational Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship during Lent
Text: John 6:1-14

Peter and I were at Home Depot yesterday for some of our usual Saturday errands and on our way back to the car we saw some really beautiful wooden picnic tables just being placed out on display. For reasons I don't understand they had put them out between the fencing samples and the riding lawn mowers, but they were still impossible to miss. They weren't even priced yet, but they were really pretty. They caught our eye because we've been talking about adding a wooden picnic table to our backyard for years now but just never got around to it. So, that whole conversation has opened up again! And so have all the memories of family picnics when I was little.

Actually, that's kind of a misleading statement because in my family we didn't really go on picnics. Neither my father nor my mother liked eating outside for various reasons so the thought of just going off on a random picnic was out of the question. We didn't go on hikes in the woods. We didn't visit parks. My dad mowed the lawn, and my mother gardened a lot, but this was the extent of our outdoor activities. However we did have a lake house and that was the one exception to the "no picnics" reality of my childhood. At our lake house, we had a massive outdoor patio along one whole side of the house and on that patio was a huge picnic table. And it wasn't just huge because I was a kid. It could actually seat about 12-14 people at one time, so it really was quite large. And, during the summer weeks we were at the lake, we ate outside at that picnic table most of the time, especially when my brothers, who were both in college then, had their friends at the lake to waterski and goof around. All those people always ended up at our house where the menu was always the same – hot dogs and hamburgers, potato salad, corn on the cob and watermelon. And I loved those meals. To me it was just magical to eat outside, and I could not, for the life of me, understand why my

parents didn't want to go on more picnics to other places. But they didn't, which is why when I think of family picnics, I remember those long ago summer nights out on that patio as we ate among the flickering fireflies. It was magical.

Perhaps that's why I've always loved this story about Jesus feeding the 5000. It is the only miracle story to appear in all four gospels and it is essentially about a time when Jesus turned one of his teaching, preaching and healing sessions into a massive outdoor picnic. That's not how it started off, of course. It began as crowds followed Jesus out of one of the towns where he had been and, when he reached a hillside, he turned and began to teach them. Interestingly though, the four Gospels differ greatly on what was going on with Jesus and the disciples immediately before the decision to leave where they had been staying. In other words, the context in which this story is placed is different in all four versions of this same story. An important reminder here is that whenever we encounter and engage with any biblical text, we are always encountering it at the point where three different contexts intersect: the context in which the original biblical writer is writing; the context the biblical story describes; and our own context from within which we encounter the text. These intersecting contexts are present anytime we engage with any text but those contexts are especially visible as we consider this story which is slightly different in each of the four Gospels.

For example, in Mark – the Gospel written closest in time to when Jesus was alive – this story is placed in the immediate aftermath of John the Baptist's execution by King Herod. The disciples had just brought the news to Jesus who was upset by it, so they suggested to him that he come away with them to be alone for a little while. As they were walking out of town, the crowd saw him and followed, ending with the massive crowd gathering on the hillside. In Matthew's Gospel, it too takes place after the beheading of John the Baptist only in Matthew the crowd gloms on to Jesus after he has been away by himself with the disciples for a while, presumably to mourn and pray.

The context in Luke's Gospel is quite different. Here, this story is placed after Jesus has sent the disciples out on their own to preach, teach and heal. While they were out and about teaching in Jesus' name as he had told them to, King Herod heard what was going on because he was getting reports that all this was being done by John the Baptist whom he knew he had already beheaded. So King Herod resolved to find Jesus and listen to him for himself. But, before that could happen, the disciples returned to Jesus from their "trial run" on their own and told him what had been going on. He then took them away to the town of Bethsaida and it was there the crowds found him, and they followed him out to the hillside.

Back to John, the Gospel reading for today. This is my favorite version of this beloved story for many reasons, not the least of which is because the food for the crowd came from a small boy who was willing to share his lunch. Thus, John's account of this story is the only one which offers a source for the food which was miraculously multiplied to feed over 5000 people. The other thing I find interesting in this story is that John's context for the story is totally different from the other gospels. In John, this story is placed after a lengthy discourse (there are a lot of those in John's Gospel) and that discourse follows a time when Jesus is excoriated by the scribes and pharisees for healing a sick man by the waters of the pool in Siloam. It was the sabbath when Jesus spoke to the man whom he had seen many days lying by the side of the waters of the pool which were believed to be healing when "the waters were stirred." But the man could never quite make it into the pool because of his many infirmities so he remained stranded by its side. It is here Jesus encountered him and asked him if wanted to be made well and then healed him on the sabbath. The story goes on from there, but this is the main crux of it and the reason behind the long discourse which immediately precedes John's telling of the feeding of the 5000 miracle story.

I wanted us to consider the four different contexts of this same bible story this morning because it illustrates beautifully why it is so

important for everyone – and I do mean everyone – to understand not only what is in the Bible but just as importantly how to read it – perhaps decode it is a better way to put it – for themselves. In our Bible study class this past Wednesday we talked about exactly this point because it's not only incredibly important on its own merit but it's also incredibly relevant today when so many right wing folks intent on completely upending our country, are basing their governmental decisions on their own biblical ideology. Put another way, there are a lot of folks out there who want to tell YOU what the Bible says so you will begin looking at the world the way they do. The *only* resistance to that is to know for yourself what the Bible says.

For example, this story is usually cited by folks as yet another example of a miracle performed by Jesus the biggest point of which is the size of the crowd which witnessed and participated in the miracle – 5000. That's certainly true in the conservative evangelical traditions. Jesus was able to create enough food for 5000 people out of the air. That's a true miracle!! Jesus as divine being and Savior must be worshipped. So, you might be wondering if this difference in perspective on this story matters all that much. Yes, in fact it does matter a lot because looking at this miracle through the lens of divine miracle also invites and even encourages viewing poor people needing assistance with food as somehow less than before God. If they don't have enough food, surely it must be their fault because if they were good people (read fundamentalist Christian here), surely God would have provided for them. Therefore, their need for food is because they are somehow unworthy of God's help and therefore ours. If they are poor, it must be their own fault. If they are hungry, it must be their own fault. If they don't have a home, it must be their own fault. It doesn't matter why they are in need of help. They should be able to help themselves. Period. End of conversation. Yikes.

Okay, let's look at the more progressive interpretation of this miracle. I'm guessing you've heard it as I've even preached on it a couple of times here. That view holds that yes, the boy shared his food

and yes, there was some kind of miracle that made enough food for 5000 people suddenly materialize. Only it materialized from the goodness of the hearts of the people who were already there on the hillside with each having brought just a little food for themselves. When Jesus prayed to God to bless the food it was the people's hearts that were transformed, and they ended up sharing the food they had brought which proved to be more than enough to feed everyone. This progressive interpretation fits in neatly in with progressive Christian values which emphasize Jesus' instructions to do for others what you would do for yourself and to care for the least of these. Big difference. Both are Christian interpretations of this text with wildly different conclusions. Which one is right? That becomes *the* question here, doesn't it?

Which one of these interpretations of this well-known story is right? This is where understanding all those contexts intersecting at the point at which we engage with this text become important. Remember, in Matthew and Mark, the writer's context has him aware that Jesus has just received word that his cousin, and the one he turned to for his own baptism as his ministry began, John the Baptist, was dead – beheaded by King Herod. Jesus' heart was hurting and the disciples wanted to take care of him. So they took him away by himself for a while. This is where the crowd intercepts them, and the rest of the story unfolds. The story is somewhat similar in Luke in that King Herod hears all that is happening as the disciples are out doing as Jesus taught them and he decides he needs to hear Jesus for himself. By the way, we don't know if this ever happens. In John, the writer has Jesus living through yet another run in with the religious authorities because he was healing on the Sabbath. So, it's clear that each of the writers of these four Gospel accounts are writing from a specific perspective. They are not starting from the same place.

What is the context of – the world of – the story itself? That's the second context we need to ponder. That is the same in all four stories. And, it's quite simple and forthright. The people craved Jesus – what

he taught them about a loving and merciful God who cares more about them than the rules and regulations of the religious authorities. They would endure almost anything just to be near Jesus, to hear him and experience him in person. They hung on his every word until the day grew long and people were hungry – not just for Jesus but for food too. And they were fed. Jesus had some food. He prayed over it, and it was distributed and somehow, somehow there was enough for everyone. So much that there were leftovers for people to take home. However it came about, there was more than enough. That is the context of the story itself.

So, what of the third context – our world as it intersects with the story? Well, that truly does depend on you. Do you believe Jesus helped everyone who needed help just because they needed help? Do you think Jesus fed people just because they were hungry? Can you ever recall a time when Jesus advocated for “worthiness” evaluations? No. In fact in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus does the exact opposite in the parable of the sheep and goats. You remember that one – where Jesus ends by telling the people who had been judged by the “king” (a metaphor for God here) to be evil because when they saw him hungry or thirsty or sick or in prison or naked and homeless, they just ignored him. At the same time, the people who were invited into the eternal kingdom of heaven were those who saw the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the naked and the homeless and helped them, however they needed help. The Gospels are pretty clear on that. All of them. So, the question then becomes for each of us to consider is how much Jesus’s teachings are a part of our personal contexts as his followers each day.

Dear ones, we encounter stories about real people in our own lives each day that bring to mind the parables and stories about Jesus during his life on this earth. This has always been true – when we’re paying attention to things at least – but it is even more so these days when our world is being intentionally and brutally upended by a small group of people who have decided they know better than anyone else

how things should be. To most of us, their willingness to hurt innocent people “just because” is frightening. But, dear ones, be assured God is in the middle of even this. God is right here with us and God is asking something of us in the midst of this situation – this context in which we find ourselves as unwilling participants.

God’s ask of us might be surprising, but it’s also exactly what we need in these fearful moments. God still wants us to find joy each day. God wants us to listen for the birdsong and rejoice in the green shoots breaking through the soil as new life, new beginnings are happening right in front of us. God wants us to savor every moment with our families and our friends and to rest in the grace and peace of those moments. This reality, dear ones, is our miracle every day. And, God still expects us to care for the least of these – the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the homeless, the naked as well as the foreigner and the stranger in our land. The Bible is very clear on all of this. This is why I can say with confidence, dear ones, that Jesus loves a good picnic, especially when there is lots of fish and bread. Hmmm – almost sounds like a Lenten Fish Fry, doesn’t it! Now there’s a thought... Amen.