

Satisfied?

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

9th Sunday after Pentecost - July 25, 2021

Text: John 6:1-21

GOSPEL READING John 6:1-21

Starting today, we skip from the Gospel of Mark to the Gospel of John, spending five weeks on Jesus' teaching about the bread of life. We're calling this little excursion into deliciousness, "O Taste and See that God Is Good." We kick off with side-by-side miracles, which are always called "signs" in John.

After this--after what? After Jesus had healed a man who had been unable to walk all his life - for 38 long years! Jesus credited his relationship with God as the source of his power; many were hungry to know more; but many still doubted. Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Amen. TBTG

O taste and see that God is good. Please pray with me. God, our hearts are fickle, our wants are many, our appetites crave what doesn't satisfy while our real needs go unmet. You know us better than we know ourselves. Show us the banquet you have already spread for us, in Jesus' name. Amen



I stopped at Target this week; I thought, as long as I'm here, I may as well pick up some toilet paper. You know, I had a hard time finding my preferred brand in all the aisles of overflowing shelves. Only afterward did I think of how those shelves looked in March of 2020.



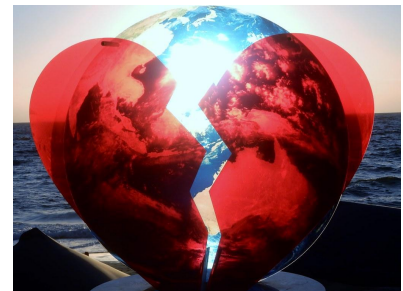
On the way home, I passed a garage sale. Naturally, I pulled over.



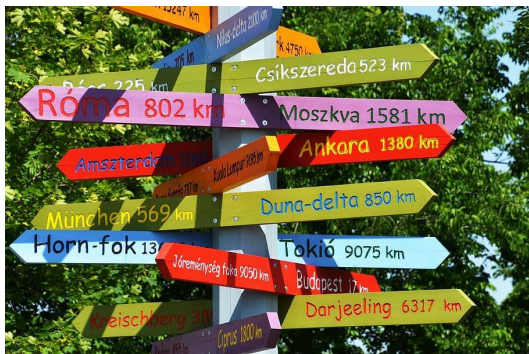
There was nothing I wanted, but

I did notice the "free" box full of hand sanitizer. I didn't take any. Why would I? It's everywhere now.

People are funny, aren't we? What starts as genuine need somehow becomes obsession. So what is your true heart's desire? I don't



mean the passion of the moment; I mean, how is your heart broken? What is the hole in you that's longing to be filled? I'll say more about that in a minute.



But first, think about this story of Jesus feeding the 5000. Does this story bring up any special thoughts or memories for you? This is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. But there are some interesting differences. For one thing, John doesn't call Jesus' special actions miracles, he calls them signs. What are signs? They point us in some direction. There's a reason Jesus' supernatural acts are "signs." Where do they point? Think about it.

Second, John's story has grass. A lot of grass. This would be normal for summer in Minnesota, but not in Jesus' time and place - it's practically desert. It seems like a strange detail to add - until you remember that John's is the only gospel to identify Jesus as the shepherd, whose sheep hear his voice and follow.





In every gospel account, Jesus blesses the five poor barley loaves and two fish. Only in John, he doesn't give the bread and fish to the disciples to distribute. He offers it with his own hands.

And when everyone's satisfied, he does something else. In all the gospels, twelve baskets of leftovers are collected somehow. But in John, he tells the disciples specifically to gather up the fragments. Why? "So that nothing may be lost." So that none may be lost. Keep that in mind.

There are more differences, but just one more I want to note today. Only in John do the people want to make Jesus king, by force. He knows their hearts, and he disappears; he knows that they only think they want a king; in reality, they want something... else.

I think it's hard to know what we really want, or what will satisfy us. We have so much. We clutch what we have so tightly. I think we don't always understand why. I remember a tiny girl of 6 or 7 in a parish I served. Ana had come as a toddler from a situation of desperate poverty in



Romania and had been adopted by a loving family, members of the church. One day in Sunday School, we were doing crafts with scraps of old gift wrap paper. Little Ana almost went crazy. She grabbed everyone's scrap. She wanted it all. Her mother apologized. "She has this obsession with wrapping paper; maybe because it's colorful and pretty and because she was so deprived as an infant." Somehow, she felt wrapping paper would fill the empty spot in her heart, that hoarding it would satisfy her.

Her case is obvious. But am I so different? OK, here's my dirty little secret. My obsession is with pens and pencils. Writing instruments. Every time I see a free one, I grab it. I hoard them in cups and baskets and drawers all over the house, until the cheap ones dry up and have to be thrown away. I think it's because when I was traveling abroad and writing letters home by hand, it was almost impossible to find a good pen. I started judging countries on the quality of their pens. The Greek pens drove me crazy, but Indian pens were worse. When I got to Japan, I was in heaven. Japanese pens are the best.





But was it really pens I wanted, or connection with the people I missed, people I wrote those endless letters to? Pens and pencils did not fill the hole in my heart. Somewhere in my travels, I realized that I felt hungry all the time, too. And eating didn't help. What satisfied my hunger was people -- their love and their generosity. And the poorer the people, the greater their giving.

Let me tell you how I learned that. We were in Senegal, West Africa. A Peace Corps worker introduced us to a woman he knew, a single mother with a big brood of children. She invited us for dinner. "What gift should we bring?" we asked our friend. He suggested sugar, a luxury there. We bought a little box of sugar cubes for a dollar or so.



She had prepared a huge metal bowl full of rice mixed with the mashed up green leaves of a plant that grows wild there, that's high in protein. And some little green wrinkled vegetables, unbelievably bitter. We sat on wooden crates in her dusty yard, her children big-eyed and curious around us. Our host cradled her disabled daughter in her lap, and tenderly fed her with her own fingers. We all dipped our hands into the same bowl - right hands only, which is strict etiquette, as

left hands serve another purpose. (Toilet paper and even toilets are a luxury, out of reach of most people.) She almost cried when we gave her the whole box of sugar - possibly more than she'd ever owned at once before. What we gave was nothing for us. What she gave us was more than she could afford. She gave it with all her heart. I have never experienced more lavish hospitality. I've never forgotten her. She filled my heart.



When Jesus tells the disciples to pick up the broken pieces so that nothing shall be lost, I think he's talking about more than food. He's talking about all the lost, damaged people, all those left behind, deprived, excluded, denied a place at life's table. He's talking about tiny Ana from Romania, and the little disabled girl on her mother's lap. He's talking about those Jews who feared being kicked out of their own community because they dared to follow him. He could be talking about everyone who's not in church today because they've been told, though maybe not in so many words, that they're not welcome. This is the nature of Jesus' hospitality: Nothing and no one is lost. No matter how broken, none are left out. Including you. And me.



The next scene - and the next sign - happens as the disciples' boat is tossed about on the rough sea. Jesus walks across the water toward them. It freaks them out. He calls to them, "It is I." Literally, "I AM. Don't be afraid." Then, says John, they *want* him in the boat. He gets in and *immediately* they are safe on land. Can it be that what they really needed all along was Jesus, just Jesus, in the boat with them? When he was there, they felt secure. They could relax. So can you. He's still here, in your boat, he's got your back. He offers himself with boundless

hospitality. Offers life, contentment, fullness, abundance of whatever it is you really need. With his own hands, he gives his life to you.

As we begin this five-week journey with Jesus as bread of life, this journey of tasting the goodness of God. I invite you to do something kind of foolish and fun. Take a look at your life. Identify any little harmless obsessions you may have - like Ana's wrapping paper, or my pens and pencils. What is it for you? Kitchen gadgets? Shoes? Tools? Books? License plates? Stuffed animals? Computer stuff? This is not about judgment or criticism, this is about knowing yourself in a non-scary way. If you feel like it, share your secret with me, or with someone you trust. I can guarantee, whatever it may be, God already knows what it is. And God knows what you really need. Amen. To be continued.



Prayers

~Merciful One, we look with sorrow on earth's troubles: wildfires blazing, drought shriveling crops, crazy weather events - and understand that our greed, in part, has brought these woes upon us. Help us understand ourselves and curb our wandering desires.

~As the covid Delta variant surges, we fear a return to the losses of the past year; may we be advocates for healthy precautions and helpful vaccines, so that lives and livelihoods are safe.

~All power comes from you; help our country's leaders and all world leaders to share their power and work together for the good of all, so that nothing and no one is lost or forgotten.

~We give thanks for the richness of summer: may we enjoy it to the full. Protect those who travel, watch over those who work in hot fields and factories; open us to you and to one another.

Our Father...