

## **“Feeding a Revolution”**

Sermon Preached by The Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture Text: John 6:1-21

With acknowledgement to Ms. Oprah Winfrey, here are three things I know for sure. One, that no church pot luck runs out of food; I’m told we’re going to prove this rule in just a little while. Sure, the brownies may go faster than the broccoli salad, but that broccoli is nourishing, it’s good for you. Two, there are always leftovers at Thanksgiving. Three, each year we Americans throw away about 40% of our food supply. According to Harvard Law School’s Food Law and Policy Clinic, we waste \$165 billion each year in uneaten food. This, of course, isn’t just money thrown down the drain, it’s actual waste that takes up actual space and clogs up landfills—roughly 160 billion pounds of food trash, annually, being added to garbage heaps across the country. These are not exactly purple mountains majesty, nor are they mounts on which people would be eager to sit for a sermon.

For many of us, we live in a world of abundance. Many of us—I imagine many of you—have not known what it means to be systemically hungry. We feed ourselves, we feed our families, we feed our friends, and being good people of faith we try to help feed others too. I brought a bag of groceries and paper goods for your drive just outside the sanctuary doors, and I know many of you have no doubt also brought dishes to share or cakes to auction today. Food is one of the best ways to bring community together. The growing and harvesting, the cooking and preparing, the sharing and the eating—these are all things we do to nourish ourselves and mark the days of our lives. Food is also what connects us to people in distant times and stories from far away places.

Many, many years ago a rabbi and his chosen leaders had been out doing the works of the Lord—healing the sick, teaching about the realm of God, performing other miracles as signs of the presence of God among them. They had been travelling through the backwater roads of Galilee’s hill country and so great were the works of the leader that crowds began to gather in eager anticipation wherever he went. Jesus of Nazareth’s fame was like none before him in those parts, and the people were hungry for a leader like him. In the story where we meet Jesus today, they were also physically hungry, and it falls to Jesus to feed them.

You, good and faithful people, know what happens. You know this story of the five loaves and two fish; you’ve heard about the story of the feeding of the 5,000. The story we hear this morning from John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples were sitting on top of a mountain when they saw a large crowd coming toward them. Jesus the host sees them, knows them, and he knows what he is going to do. He’s going to feed them, all of them, this massive mob of people coming up the mountain to meet him and his disciples. In John’s account, Jesus knows what he is going to do as soon as he sees them, but that doesn’t stop him from a quick teaching moment with the disciples. He turns to them and asks “what are we going to do?” And

they, being the disciples, are flummoxed. Philip declares, “we wouldn’t have enough money in six months to feed all these people!” Andrew, quick to shift attention, points out a lone boy who happens to have a couple fish and five small barely cakes. “That’ll do,” is basically Jesus’s reply as he asks the disciples to have everyone sit down on the grass. First, know what you’re going to do. Second, settle everyone down. Third, feed them—feed them so well and so full that they feel as if they may never be hungry again. Then, after the supper is ended, gather up the leftovers, careful not to miss a crumb as you store them for another day. In the presence of Christ, there will be nothing wasted, nothing thrown away.

Now this is the story as John tells it. It’s also the story similar to how Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell it. It’s one of the few stories that makes an appearance in all four of the gospels we have preserved in our cannon today. Not only that, some gospels tell it twice. In addition to the story of the feeding of the 5,000 with two fish and five loaves, Matthew and Mark also remember a story of feeding 4,000 with seven loaves and a few small fish. The details of each writer’s story differ just enough that if you were going to try to reconstruct “what really happened,” you’d have to leave some of each writer’s embellishment on the cutting room floor. What seems important to me this day, though, is just how well remembered this story is. From all the days in ministry Jesus had, from all the miraculous signs and wonders, from all that he taught and all that he gave, this story of feeding people is central and pivotal in each of the gospels. Eating is at the heart of ministry here. Feeding the 5,000, which is to say, feeding us, is one of the things Jesus does best.

When I was in seminary, I had a church history professor who liked to remind us that the faculty in its infinite wisdom had assigned him the unenviable task of teaching us the first thousand years of church history in a 12-week semester. He always ended this reminder with a sly, “good luck. In one of the very first classes at Union Seminary, Professor McGuckin stood in front of us all and asked, “who teaches us our theology?” Eager grad student hands flew into the air: our pastors, our professors, the theologians, the philosophers, the Bible. He let us all babble on with our ridiculous list as he leaned back against the podium grinning wider and wider. Finally, he stopped us all: “No,” he’d shout in his broad Irish brogue. “It’s the grandmothers. We learn our theology from our grandmothers,” he said. It’s the grandmothers who carry the traditions, who make the rules, who tell us to sit up straight, say this prayer. It’s the grandmothers who cook for us and whose recipes bind generations together.

You know, I think he’s right. Grandmothers are real, they get their hands dirty, they cook for us, smother us in hugs, they gather us in, and we listen to them. They feed us, and they feed our souls. We remember stories of our grandmothers, maybe some of you are grandmothers. My own experience with grandmothers is that they possess a great amount of wisdom and an even greater amount of compassion. Unlike parents, grandparents also tend to be more willing to laugh at the little moments of rebellion small children are prone to display and that drive mom and dad up the wall. Grandparents have seen it all before and they know just what to do. I imagine that among that crowd of 5,000 there were many grandparents there eating fish and

bread that day. I also imagine they might have been the most surprised among the crowd by the mighty miracle. “Well, in all my days,” you can hear one of them say, “I have never, ever seen anything like that. This man is something special.”

It is that voice of knowing and seeing and recognizing that Jesus was doing something extraordinary that speaks the gospel’s passion to us today. It is also that voice that in recognizing something long-awaited wants to act, to rise up, and to get to work because grandparents are also best at knowing that time is short and we don’t have a day to waste. Perhaps it was the elders among the crowd of 5,000 who started the whispers of awe first. Perhaps it was in seeing their elders’ amazement that the younger generations started to get to their feet. Perhaps it was a simple act of permission giving that those who had lived long enough to see it all gave to the whole crowd in their unbridled enthusiasm that began to stir up the crowd. Soon the 5,000 were on their feet looking more like a mob than an orderly dinner party, and soon they started to come for him. Yes, their bodies had been fed, but my God were their soul’s hungry. Hungry for change, hungry for leadership, reading to rise—to be fed and to feed, to be led and to lead.

Such starts a revolution in the ancient world so great that we feel its tremors even today. John’s accounting of this story tells us that 5,000 people see Jesus for who is his and they want to make him their king. They needed him, and they had an idea of how they needed him, but even king is a human profession too limited, too small for God among us. Jesus retreats—he is their teacher, their friend, their healer, their helper, but he will not be their king. Well, not in the way they think they want anyway.

We patriotic Americans have a particular allergy to kings that Jesus would understand. We Presbyterians have an allegiance to consensus and the maintenance of things decently and in good order as taught by our elders who teach us so much. We who are hungry, we who thirst for righteousness, we too come to Jesus longing to be fed. We come to feel the weight of this revolution that Jesus promises in our own time and for our own selves. To what end, though? Is it our bodies that need the feast of Christ? Is it our souls? Is it just for us, or is it for the least among us too?

We will be fed, friends. When grace is what nourishes us, there will there always be enough, more than enough. What will we do with this abundance? How will we extend the feast? Will we feed the poor, or tend to the sick? Will we look for the wisdom among us and witness to the power of change that comes when the Spirit is present? Just like the moons and like suns, with the certainty of tides, just like hopes springing high,” will we rise? Rise to the glory of God made known in each of us. Rise to the promise of resurrection that vanishes even death. Rise to a world where nothing is wasted. Rise to a world where all are fed. Rise to the revolution God is stirring in our own hearts—to love without borders, to speak truth in all things, to be a resurrection people ready for miracles.