

## WHAT BREAKS BESIDES BREAD

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding  
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church  
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Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, [and told him all that they had done and taught.] He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.*

*Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

*When it grew late, his disciples came to Jesus and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.*

*So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand.*

Your theme this summer puts the spotlight on the table as a place where we might expect the meaning of community to be unveiled: the reasons and incentives for weathering the challenges of being together. And today we have the good fortune of an actual practicum, a table-top exercise so to speak; an opportunity to experience a meal as a potential occasion of revelation, and, perhaps, a means of grace. It's interesting how seldom we mainline Protestants put our loaves on the table: maybe monthly, sometimes only a handful of times a year. John Calvin thought the Table should be spread weekly but it seems that his successors, our forebears, came to feel they should guard the power of the experience more closely maybe to keep it from wearing thin or to let the hunger and thirst for grace build or maybe out of a sense that we need time to make ourselves ready for the grace that's served here.

Your theme, though, starts by taking us back beyond the upper room of the Last Supper, all the way to a lakeside field that was a "deserted place" until the story begins. Mark calls it a "great crowd" of people who are evidently hungry enough for something to follow Jesus and the disciples off the grid and then to push through the boundary of their quiet time in this now-no-longer-deserted place. Really, from the beginning this is a story about satisfying hunger even before the gathering dusk gets the disciples worrying about where an evening meal was going to come from. Jesus "began to teach them many things." Mark doesn't tell us much about those things that Jesus taught them but in order not to miss the import of what happens in that crowd

we need not to let that be a throw-away line. *What things* did Jesus begin to teach them? What do we know about what the crowd heard in that field, and what it might have meant to them to learn these things?

Well. We know that Jesus didn't condemn even people who might have seemed to deserve it. John the Baptist had hurled his call for repentance against the outrages and excesses around him. Jesus, on the other hand, knew that, for the true penitent, the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation offers a more powerful incentive to contrition, a more powerful instrument of transformation, than guilt. One theologian I read called what Jesus offered a "gust of grace"—and who wouldn't lean into that?

And we know that Jesus made a point of keeping company with outcasts and miscreants and reprobates. We know he went out of his way to lean into relationships with the kinds of people who raised other people's eyebrows, from hated tax collectors to people afflicted with physical or mental illness to Samaritans to people crumbling under the memory of their own terrible mistakes.

In fact, we know that Jesus went so far as to sit down at table with them, to break bread with them, which was more unsettling than we might realize because matters of table fellowship held a kind of power over the social mores of his day that's almost unimaginable for us now. It's hard to find any kind of workable analogy in our own time for this kind of social norm-busting but if you think back just a generation or two to the kind of shock and, sometimes, boundary-violating horror it caused in social circles to make certain choices about how you related to people whose skin color was different than yours, if you think about things people could say or do that would seem utterly scandalous, you might be on the right track. Jesus chose to sit down at the table with people that might cause us to get up from it if we realized who they were.

And we know that the religious authorities of Jesus' day were, indeed, scandalized by these things that Jesus taught, and by the practicum he enacted more or less constantly. In thinking about this loaves and fishes story, it's important to remember that both the company (of outcasts and reprobates) and the context (a meal) probably contributed in equal measure to the offense they took at him. And we know that Jesus was aware of this, and spoke to it directly: more than once he said, "happy", by which he meant blessed, "*blessed* are the ones who take no offense at me, who are not scandalized by me." He wasn't phased by his encounters with impurity though he lived in a society that steeled itself against encounters with impurity at every turn. So it's not just that the meals he chose to eat among the company he kept were the *occasion* for his teaching; they *were* the teaching.

We also know that Jesus, as he's pictured in the gospels, really had little appetite for being seen as a miracle worker. He really does seem to have been one of those people with extraordinary gifts as a healer, one of those people whose inner health seemed almost tangible, whose integrity was contagious. He was surely one of the most transparently and affectingly God-centered people the world has ever known. Even so, when people wanted him to do something, he did what he could to get away or, at least, told people that that wasn't the point. It must have been easy to get distracted by the quite marvelous good that he did, especially as a healer but the thing, I think, that mattered about him most was that his way of being present both gave you an appetite for God, *and satisfied it*, all at the same time.

So here's a crowd of people to whom he began to teach the sorts of things that he taught. By the time the shadows of twilight began to gather in the folds of that field, all that teaching must surely have begun to

fill them with hope and reconciliation and passion and courage, all those ingredients of the dish to which we've come to give the single name, *gospel*.

Meanwhile the disciples, to whom the problem of figuring out how it's all going to work must have fallen day by day, started to worry about things—food, distances, time—knowing, as they surely must have, that this crowd of probably mostly observant Jewish people would not be prepared to risk sharing food with strangers whose state of ritual purity was uncertain to them. “Give them time to go and deal with food,” the disciples urged. To which Jesus responded, first, *see what you can do to help them with it* and then, *let's see what gospel can do to help them with it*. Notice that the idea that everyone should eat together is Jesus'; he's the one who tells them to just sit down right there and isn't it wonderful that right at this point in the story, for no reason that I can think of, scripture includes the detail that they sat down together, side by side, “on the green grass.” *The green grass*. As though to tell us that, if you happened to be there, you couldn't have forgotten, not only what it felt like, but even what it looked like. The green grass.

Something is growing, all right, in that deserted field. Jesus takes whatever loaves and fish those fretting disciples were able to scrounge up, and then he does what he does: says words, uses those hands, lets those eyes fill with that kind of light he had, his voice with the sort of kindness and wisdom and generosity that made people want to follow even out to deserted places. He prays, and then perhaps says something like, *take, eat...*

And where does all the food come from? Well, even the Bible doesn't really tell us that. But one of the other things we know is that the way it works to dine upon gospel, sitting down together in the place where things are growing to feast upon good news, is that what breaks besides bread is barriers. No, we don't know where all the rest of the loaves and fishes came from but even if it was only from all the satchels of a crowd of people who when they first got there might have thought they were all a potential threat to each other's state of spiritual health but ended up thinking they were all potential next-door neighbors in the reign of God even if the food came from nowhere more magical than among them, a rising tide of abundance coming in, a commonwealth of nourishment that quietly pushed isolation and self-preservation off the table altogether. Well, isn't that already a miracle?

Ethicist Gil Bailie writes that “Jesus' burning passion was to free those he encountered from the grip of religious mystification and scandalous delusion, whose effects were to harden the human heart and turn people into accomplices in cruelty and lovelessness.”<sup>1</sup> Bailie thinks that what happened that evening on the green grass is that “he opened their hearts and they, in turn, opened their satchels” and produced food that they could not otherwise ever have imagined feeling free to share, or for that matter feeling any desire to share, with strangers whose state of grace they'd have instinctively questioned. “Jesus preached of a God of love and forgiveness and then invited those who heard his message to sit down together and live for a moment in the [realm] about which he was preaching.”

These days we live in a world in which being scandalized by things other people think or do or are is a kind of compulsion that's getting harder and harder to resist. When, six years ago, the phrase “basket of

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<sup>1</sup> Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004). Bailie's analysis of this story, in the wider context of his examination of Jesus's attempts to subvert paradigms of retaliatory sacrificial violence, fills me with admiration – and I owe much of the thinking of this sermon to him.

deplorables” had its moment in the limelight, it seemed like the sort of flip and witty thing someone might say in a moment of unguarded candor. Now, isn’t it how more and more people seem to be sorting the whole rest of the world outside their own circles? Being outraged, scandalized by each other, feeling it necessary to hold each other at arm’s length, is a habit that looks more and more familiar; but isn’t it more and more an indulgence we can hardly afford? And if at times we feel that, after all, we ourselves have been on the receiving end of scandalous disdain, well, what did Jesus say about responding in kind to that sort of thing?

I have a colleague who likes to say that when our life in Christian community is working as it should our experience of worship should be a little bit like a rehearsal for heaven. A practicum for the Reign of God. Very well then. We’re all hungry. We’ve gone out of our way to trace his steps to here having heard things about the gospel he’s serving up. We’ve each got things with us, in our pockets, in our hearts, that we might not have thought of sharing with anybody. But here he is, teaching those things again, and looking at us in that way of his. And here is a meal. If we needed time to get ready for the grace of sitting at table together, well, it’s past time now. The grass won’t get any greener than this.