

## FISHES, LOAVES AND THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY: WHEN NOT ENOUGH IS PLENTY

Sermon delivered by Rev. Stewart Pattison

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

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Scripture:

Psalm 23

John 6: 1-15

When I received the theme for this summer's worship, I immediately assumed that there *is* a connection between the multiplication of loaves and fish and community. If community represents the transformation of isolated individuals into a people with a common life, then in my reading nothing like that happened. There is no evidence that they formed any relationships after that or sought to become disciples. Later, Jesus warns the crowd against looking for him in order to gratify their material needs.

I confess that despite what I have said—or maybe *because of it*—I experience something inside which yearns for the episode to mean something more than this.

To yearn is closely related to “longing” which is frequently used in the Hebrew scriptures. Psalm 42, verses 1-6a, expresses this deep spiritual desire:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams/ so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night,  
While people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”  
These things I remember as I pour out my soul:  
How I went with the throng and led them in the procession to the  
house of God,  
With glad shouts of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
And why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I will again praise him, my help and my God.*

The fundamental source of longing is absence: something is missing. We do not long for something we already have. It is the fact of absence which provokes this longing to experience again a lost sense of intimacy.

In Psalm 42, the author evokes this deep sense of loss of intimacy with God and connection with community. It is like a deer in a time of drought by a dried-up stream bed recalling the refreshment of continually flowing water. The poem evokes a profound yearning,

not just for the water which quenches bodily thirst, but also, and more deeply, the painful absence of the gurgling, splashing joy of life whose source is the loving Creator shared in the company of human beings. The memories of past joy, of leading the throng of singing pilgrims to the house of God only sharpen the pain of the absence. In this state the poet describes the feeling of exile from the spiritual center of life. And yet despite or *because* of this experience of absence, the poet is moved to make a courageous and stunning claim: "Hope in God, Oh my soul, for I will again praise him, my help and my God" (underline added).

I propose that at the heart of the deeply lived spiritual journey is the simultaneous experience of acute absence *and* the even deeper trust in the ongoing and abiding presence of God in our lives. In vital spirituality, the two are as inseparable as yin and yang, with each holding within a sign of the other.

True longing follows a path of detachment and rebonding. True longing seeks to look beyond all of the things and relationships which claim to be the objects of our desire. The journey of letting go begins with relinquishing the simplest of these objects. They may be the tokens of our childhood or of our children's childhood. The difficulty of detaching from these things itself is the beginning of awakening to a deeper desire. We recognize just how fiercely we have been holding on and come to seek the peace that comes with releasing the objects of those desires. Bit by bit, relinquishment by relinquishment, we come to be aware that our lives take place in a much more spacious setting than the narrow world of the objects of desire which have so closely defined our lives.

Some of Jesus' most abrupt and seemingly harsh teachings go straight to heart of the human desire to hold onto that which is immediate at the cost of moving into the spacious generosity of God. His most memorable and infamous is that the one who does not hate father and mother cannot be his disciple. Is Jesus anti-family? No. Yet he recognizes the hold that family has on us and the difficulty our attachment to family puts in the way of our growing into God.

I suggest that when Jesus asks Philip where they were to find food for the multitude, it is to awaken him to his utter insufficiency. Philip's response is immediate: Six months wages would not buy enough bread. Not to mention the ridiculous logistics required to get such an amount assuming the nearest towns could even supply the food.

In short, *there is not enough!* Indeed, there is nothing. Andrew points out a boy with five barley loaves and two cooked fish, but echoes Philip's cry of despair: "...what are these among so many?". This is a rhetorical question anticipating the answer: Not enough. Virtually nothing.

I propose that the ridiculous nature of Jesus' question and the utter insufficiency of the disciples to respond has a paradoxical purpose. In asking how the disciples are going to feed the multitude Jesus is not asking for their ability, creativity and organization skills. He is asking for what they do not have.

At the very least we would call this counterintuitive. Why does Jesus ask not for what the disciples have but for what they lack? Why does he seek to awaken within them not their capability but their insufficiency? One answer, I suggest, is that Jesus' disciples are being formed into a new kind of community. Actually, the form of community is not new at all. It is as old as the Exodus and the provision for the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. The Sabbath which we observe today was not commanded simply as a time of rest but even more importantly as a day to reflect on the fact that God is the source of all life who intimately cares for creation.

In this light, Philip's and Andrew's reasonable response to Jesus' ridiculous question paves the way for a breakthrough recognition: The disciples are not to be social service workers meeting the needs of the poor and the sick. Instead, they are to be voices of *both* the overwhelming need of the world *and* the far surpassing ability of God to address the need.

Such a community must begin with a profound and personal humility. The acute knowledge that we are not omnipotent creates room in our lives for awareness not just of our insufficiency but of *God's sufficiency*. Humility bridges the gap between despair and hope. It is what allows us to make the inspirational claim of the poet in Psalm 42. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I will again praise him, my help and my God."

Yet for this community to be truly one that shares a common life, this humility must be held in common. The Achilles heel of most organizations, religious and secular, is what I call the Lucy Phenomenon. In my favorite *Peanuts* cartoon Lucy announces "If everybody agreed with me, they'd be right". This attitude is not all bad. Sometimes we are right. False humility is perhaps more dangerous for being kept under wraps. The critical point is our ability to tell the difference between an opinion which results from reactive experience and a conviction which emerges from our insufficiency and the all providing sufficiency of God.

Such a community is guided by the awareness that our deepest longings are only utterly fulfilled in an intimate relationship with the Source of all life. Such a community is far from being insulated from the world. It is inseparably connected with the overwhelming suffering of the world. Those who are part of such a community understand that ultimately our longing for intimacy with life and the Source of life is only fulfilled when the longing of all rest in the heart of God. Amen.