

July 26, 2009
Lectionary 17b
John 6:1-21
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

STARVING AMID ABUNDANCE

Don't they carry food with them? In case of an emergency? That's what I want to know. If we're going to be gone all day we pack a granola bar, a banana, a water bottle. But now Jesus and the disciples are confronted with five thousand hungry people. Five thousand mouths to feed.

Jesus is thinking hospitality and compassion like he always does. At least Philip is practical and realistic. There's no way we can feed this many people, he says. It's out of the question.

Andrew is trying to think outside the box. They've discovered a boy with five loaves and two fish. But do the math. I don't know whether the bread and fish are the lunchbox size to feed one or whether they could feed a family of four. But it would never be enough to feed five thousand!

Jump to today. According to Bread for the World, 963 million people are hungry in our world today. And every day 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes. Speaking of numbers too large to take in, add the 47 million without healthcare insurance in our country that are on our minds these days.

How can I as an individual, or we as a congregation or as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or we as a country make a difference? How can we possibly feed the world? How can we respond to all the people in need? We know it's the right thing to do, but would our offerings, our sacrifices really make a difference?

For many of us, just attending to our own problems is enough cause for anxiety. In these tough economic times we need to look out for ourselves and our future. We need to be more conservative, practical and realistic.

I'm all for that. Holy Trinity has a balanced budget this year. More or less, we are taking in what we need to pay the salaries and the bills, to care for the building and still give away 11% of our total income. You gotta feel good about that!

But Jesus isn't thinking practical. He knows what needs to be done: the people need to be fed. So he sits the crowd down. He says the blessing over the loaves and fish. And he starts distributing the food to the people.

And you know what the text says? The people had as much as they wanted. They were satisfied. I take it to mean, they were full.

Now comes the hard part. I think we have the opposite problem. We're so full that we have the highest rate of obesity in the world. 64% of us are overweight and 26% of us are obese. If we're not trying to find the right diet some of us are dealing with other kinds of eating disorders.

And it's not just the food. Most of us have so much stuff and so much environmental stimulation that we can't even keep track of what we have, let alone know what's most important to us. A book I recently read has a thoughtful chapter entitled "Starving Amid Abundance."

You'd think all this abundance would be blessing. That it would make our lives easier. That we would be content and enjoy our lives. Then why are so many of us on medication and in therapy? How can our stomachs and our closets and our checkbooks be so full and our hearts so empty?

Yes, there are starving people in the world. And yes, we would do well to learn generosity. And yes, it would help if we could instead of seeing the glass of our lives as half empty, we could see how filled to the brim it is with the good things of health, loved ones, nature and the many other blessings that we do have.

But could it be that because we have so much--too much--that *we* are starving? Starving to know what our lives are for? Starving for purpose and meaning? Starving to find what will truly satisfy?

The truth is: you can eat a huge meal and hours later you are hungry again. Not only do we continue to get hungry, we get restless. Impatient. We want to keep moving forward, growing, stretching, becoming. For better or worse, life is never static. As they say, it's always something. We're always dealing with something.

Franz Kafka has a well-known short story called the "The Hunger Artist." It tells of a man whose circus act performance is fasting. People are first awed and intrigued by the man's fasting but later they get bored and turn their attention to other side shows. At the end of the story the hunger artist is near death and is asked why he could do nothing else in life but fast. He answers, "Because I couldn't find a food that tasted good ... If I had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart's content, like you and everyone else."

For the next five weeks our gospels will be from John 6. We will reflect on our spiritual hunger and our longing for true nourishment that fills our souls. What will it take for us to truly savor our lives? To be content with what we have instead of always wanting more? What will it take for us to realize the abundance on our plates, in the sunrise over the lake, in the play of a child, in the sound of beautiful music?

Maybe that's why we come to this place each Sunday. To be reminded of that power within us, to quote Ephesians, that is able to accomplish abundantly more than we can ask or imagine. In ancient words and rituals we see, hear and taste the breadth and length, the height and depth. The love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. The fullness of God that fills our deepest longings as nothing else can do.

There is wisdom in this story. This feeding of the five thousand. Sometimes we only know what we have when we pass it out, when we share it, when we distribute it. Sometimes we only learn what we have when we say the blessing over the food and give thanks to God for the chance to live another day. Sometimes we can only learn what we truly have when we realize how empty and hungry we really are.

And so we come, with all those starving amid abundance, and all those hungering for a piece of bread. We too, come. Hands open. Ready to receive what we need.