

Proper 12B 2021 Sermon

July 25, 2021

John 6:1-15 *After this 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.*

Today, we are back in John's Gospel. Now, whenever I read John's Gospel, I have to make a conscious shift in how I approach and understand the text. You see, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell a *narrative* story of Jesus' ministry – almost a travelogue, if you will. This happened, then that happened, then the next thing happened, in sequence. John, on the other hand, approaches *his* telling of the Jesus story in a very different way. Rather than a narrative travelogue, John uses a series of several independent, highly symbolic, multi-layered vignettes centered around scenes and people never mentioned in the other three Gospels. Like the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night; or the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at a well; or Lazarus being raised from the dead. Each of these stories involves people who are so wrapped up in the mindset of the material world that they don't understand Jesus' **symbolic** language, which consistently points to the reality and power of the *spiritual* world, the kingdom of God, which is always present, within and among us. (Luke 17:21)

Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God, and Nicodemus asks how he could possibly crawl back into his mother's womb and be born again. (Ch. 3) Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that he will give her *living* water, and she says to him, "Where would you possibly get this living water, since you have no bucket and the well is deep?" (Ch. 4) After the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus tells his disciples, "Lazarus has fallen asleep,

but I am going there to awaken him.” And the disciples say to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” (Ch. 11) In each instance, Jesus speaks symbolically about *spiritual* reality, spiritual power and energy; and the people whom he engages **miss** his meaning totally, since all they can see is the concrete, material world.

And, if we are honest, is that not where **our** minds and attention are located 95% of the time – *only* at the material level of reality, without any awareness of the spiritual realm, the kingdom of God? I’m sure I would have been **just** as clueless had *I* been Nicodemus, or the Samaritan woman, or the disciples hearing about Lazarus.

And so, in reading today’s Gospel, we should be prepared for Jesus to point to the spiritual reality and energy suffusing the material; *and* we should be prepared for people to misunderstand.

Jesus goes up a mountain. Now, we know from the stories of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus’ own Transfiguration that, in the Bible, mountains are where the divine and human meet. And Jesus sees “a large crowd coming towards him,” and he somehow discerns that they are hungry. (And, given John’s delight in using words with double meanings, we should understand “hunger” to be both physical *and* spiritual hunger.)

Jesus turns to his disciple Philip and asks, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” And John tells us that Jesus asks this question in order to test him. But what is it that Jesus is testing? Philip’s problem-solving capabilities? his resourcefulness?

I would suggest that what Jesus is testing is *where Philip’s mind and energies are rooted*. Is he fixed *only* in the **physical** dimension, or does he see – however incompletely – that *spiritual* realm which is also and **always** present? We find out when he says, “Six months’ wages would not be enough to buy food for each of them to have just a crumb.” And his fellow disciple Andrew is no different. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish,” Andrew says, “but what are they among so many people?”

John Shea notes that Philip and Andrew “know the unalterable law of the physical dimension: scarcity. There are too many people, and there is too little money and too little bread. What they see—with [their minds] restricted to the physical dimension—is an impossibility. They neither *envision* bringing the spiritual to the physical nor do they know **how** to do that.”¹ But Jesus *does*; and he will

bring to this situation the *deeper* reality of the **spiritual** realm, the Kingdom of God and its power, which Philip and Andrew are not seeing, and therefore not allowing.

And I daresay that Philip and Andrew are not alone, for I think **that** is where many of *us* live, most of the time (at least **I** do): in the physical realm *alone*, where we deal with the mindset that there just isn't enough to go around: not enough money, not enough time, not enough ability or resources or energy or acceptance and love. And so I suspect that **we** would probably have reacted to Jesus' "testing" just the way that Philip and Andrew did: with a sense of hopelessness. There are just way too many needs, and way too few resources. But Philip and Andrew and you and I so often *only* think of our *own*, **human** resources; not God's. We do not tap into the limitless resources and power of God in the realm of the Spirit.

John Shea insightfully notes that, in this mountaintop scene in today's Gospel, there are similarities to the 23rd Psalm:²

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (v. 1) There is *abundance*, not scarcity, in the Kingdom of the Good Shepherd; in **that** realm, *we shall not want*.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures..." (v. 2) Jesus makes the people sit down on the green grass, grounded in the ever-fruitful and bountiful Creation, the good earth.

"He restores my soul." (v. 3) The loaves and fishes in which the crowd partakes – like the Eucharist in which we partake – is not just *physical*, but spiritual, food; restoration for the soul.

"My cup *overflows*." (v. 5) There is an unseen **overabundance** of food on that mountaintop: there are 12 baskets of leftovers.

There is an overabundance of love and grace and energy in the realm of the Spirit, the kingdom of God. But, if you are at all like me, you seldom, if ever, tap into that Source; seldom, if ever, even *think* to tap into that source, assuming that the **only** resources available are what you can access in the physical world, what you can come up with yourself.

Tom had just received, via FedEx, the new laptop computer which he had ordered. He didn't have time to open the box until later that night, right before he went to bed. He opened the box on his kitchen table and took the laptop into his bedroom, where he plugged it into the wall socket by his bed. In the morning, he

unplugged the laptop and took it to his kitchen table, where he turned it on. But there was nothing. It wouldn't even boot up. Frustrated and angry that his brand new laptop was defective, he called the manufacturer.

The tech support person with whom he spoke went through his pre-determined, ordered list of possible fixes. "First, plug it into the wall," the tech said. Now, Tom thought this was a useless step, since the battery had just been charged overnight. But he did as the technician asked. "Next, turn the computer on." He did – and it immediately booted up! Then Tom realized that the wall socket in his bedroom into which he had plugged it to charge overnight was a *switched* socket, and when he turned off the light switch in his bedroom before going to sleep, he turned off the current to that socket. All he needed to do was plug it into a socket that had electricity going to it, and he had power.

Often times, I think, you and I can be like Tom and that laptop computer. We think we have all the resources we need to function and be productive. There's enough energy in our own internal batteries to operate our lives and perform whatever activities need to be done. But unless we have been connected to the Source, our lives can seem like we are trying to feed 5,000 with only five loaves and two fish.

"I am the vine; you are the branches," Jesus will say later in John's Gospel. "If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5) In the kingdom of this material world, there never seems to be enough. But in the kingdom of God, the realm of the Spirit, there is an overabundance: 12 baskets of extra bread.

My friends, I believe we need to constantly remind ourselves that when the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want. (Psalm 23:1) He sets a table before us; feeds us with spiritual food and drink until our cup overflows. (Ps. 23:5) He restores our soul. (Ps. 23:3) Apart from him, we can do nothing; but if we remain in him, and he in us, we will produce much fruit. (John 15:5) Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. (Ps. 23:6)

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 189

2 *Ibid.*, p. 190