

“Imagine Enough”

Sermon preached at the Congregational Church of Salisbury, UCC
Salisbury, Connecticut

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Texts: John 6:1-14

Preachers are like rock stars — in this particular way: once in a while we hear something so marvelous by another artist that we want to share it ourselves. A few seasons ago I heard a brief sermon by Thomas Troeger, then homiletics professor at Yale Divinity School. He gave a reflection on an important figure in the Gospel about whom we know nothing except that he was a young boy, carrying food. Today I am offering my version of that sermon. So whatever works, Prof. Troeger deserves the credit; whatever doesn't work belongs to me.

The story for today is familiar to us from the other gospels, but John presents it a little differently. He tells us about certain *signs* which he hopes will encourage belief, be a starting point for understanding Jesus, and show Christ for who he is.

¹ After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ 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?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ 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.”

1

“Benjamin; Benjamin!”

Yes, Mother?

Benjamin, do you remember that lunch I packed into a basket this morning, for you to take to your brothers?

Yes, I remember.

What happened to it, Benjamin?

Well, um ...

Benjamin! Did you or did you not deliver lunch to your father and brothers as I told you?

Well, not exactly the way you told me.

What do you mean, “not exactly”?

[sheepish face]

Benjamin, our neighbor saw you giving away your father and brothers’ lunch!

Mom, she is totally a tattle-tale! That’s not even what happened!

Benjamin! Did you or did you not give away that lunch?

Mom, wait...

2

Benjamin, there were five loaves of bread in that basket. Now maybe that doesn’t seem like much to you but I want you to stop and think for a minute about what went into those loaves. Will you do that, Benjamin? Last season our family plowed the ground, which took days of hard labor, not to mention that the oxen that we had to rent to pull the plow. Then we sowed the seed — I’m not even talking about all the effort to get the seed in the first place —, then we harrowed the fields to work the seed into the soil. Then we spent weeks weeding the wheat and shooing off the birds that tried to eat it. Hours and days of hard work, Benjamin. You did some of it yourself. Then there was harvesting: cutting the wheat, stooking it into sheaves, hauling it back home, and threshing. After all that, Benjamin, it took grinding, and mixing, and baking to get those loaves of bread. And now you’re telling me that just like that [snap], you gave away the bread and fish I told you to take to your father and brothers?

Mom, I’m really sorry but can I tell you what happened? That rabbi was there, Jesus. He was teaching people and helping them.

Oh, Benjamin. That man? I know he teaches some good things, but he makes trouble. You know our neighbor, Mr. Zebedee? He can barely keep his fishing business going since James and John went off to follow that Jesus. That’s the man you gave our food to? What made you do such a thing?

Mom, he was over in Cana and somebody from the palace said his son was about to die at home in Capernaum and would Jesus come and save him and Jesus just said, “No worries, he’s not going to die,” and the palace man went off like that was that — and his son got better! I’m not making this up, Mopeople saw it, people we know.

Benjamin ...

And Mom, they say there was a guy way up in Jerusalem who was crippled his whole life and just wanted to go in the water because the water can cure people, I don’t know how that all works, except the man was, you know, crippled, and people always got there before he could, and Jesus just told hi“Get up! Grab your mat and walk!” and they say the man just got up and walked.

Benjamin, you really can’t believe everything you hear.

Okay, Mom, *I* didn't see those, even though it's people we know who told what they saw. But Mom, today wasn't anything I was just hearing. He was there. *I* saw. And there were a gazillion people, up one hill and down the other! And you could tell that everybody was hungry. And that bunch of people who follow him around — you know, Mr. Zebedee's sons and everybody — you could tell they had no idea what to do and they looked nervous because there were a gazillion hungry people. And Rabbi Jesus was just totally calm. I couldn't stop looking at him. And one of those guys saw me with my basket, and then *Jesus* looked at me, and he talked to me! He asked if I'd be willing to share. And Mom, when he asked me that, he made me think of you!

Oh, now, Benjamin....

3

Mom, seriously, you know you're always saying to share. And Mom, then he prayed. It was, I don't know, it was *beautiful*. Like everything just took a deep breath. And he called God "Papa," like I do to Dad when he's been really nice and everything feels good: Jesus talked just like that to God, and then he took our bread and broke it, and the same with the fish, and then he and the guys who follow him just started passing it out. He just said to everybody, "Take what you need." And everybody was taking handfuls of bread and fish, and it never ran out.

Oh, sweetie, most of our people carry a bit of extra food when they're out at mealtimes. I'm sure they all brought it out and shared it.

Mom, I watched! It didn't happen like that! It kept coming from the basket! He just held it out and said, "Take what you need." To each person.

And like you said, Mom, I really was thinking of the sowing and the harrowing, the weeding and the waiting, the cutting and stooking and threshing: I was thinking of all that and all of a sudden his prayer was so clear: that all of those things are a part of God's own self. God's own self was being given out just for people like you and me and everyone on that hillside. And I was thinking of the lake and the fish and the fisherman like Mr. Zebedee, and it was the same. Mom, God is in the water and in the fish and in the people fishing. And I saw Mr. Zebedee's sons James and John handing out the fish and it was all that anybody could want, right there, enough for everyone. There was enough.

And without even rushing Rabbi Jesus and his friends seemed to be everywhere at once, just holding out the bread and fish and saying, "Take what you need." And it never ran out! There were even leftovers, more than you gave me at first. And I did take them to Dad and my brothers. So don't worry, Mom, they did get their lunch after all. Mrs. Tattle-tale didn't tell you the whole story.

4

Benjamin, don't call her that; it's not polite. Oh, but I don't really understand, Benjamin. I believe you but I don't understand.

I don't understand, either, Mom. Maybe I never will. But I saw something amazing. It gave me chills, Mom. All those people! And Jesus, praying like God was right there, as close to him as you are to me. Mom, I never knew it before, but God was there on the hillside the same as

God is in the temple in Jerusalem when we go for Passover. Right there with us on that hillside, in the bread, in the fish, in the prayer, in Rabbi Jesus.

Benjamin, I don't know what to think. Not about the basket of bread and fish, son. I don't know what to think about you.

Mom, don't worry about me. I just know something now I didn't know before. I know that you can feed more people than you think you can. You just take what you have and give it to Jesus, and there is enough.

Look, here's the basket. You can see how much is still there.

Here: take what you need.

Prayer

Holy One, may your economy of abundance be made real in us.
May your generosity shape and guide humanity.

Too often your people have held fast to the resources you have placed in our hands;
Too often we act out of fear that there is not enough to go around;
Too often we live out our conviction that we are not enough.

God, let your Word of grace change us, today.

Renew our deep trust in the giftedness of this beautiful, fragile world you have made.
Revivify our readiness to give, and give with joy and without hesitation.
Holy One, may your ever-new economy of abundance be made real in us.
Amen.