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**“Signs and Wonders: Barley Enough”**

*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.*

*John 6:5-15*

We’re at the midpoint of this series on Christ’s signs in the Gospel of John. As we’ve looked at the past three weeks, they’re not just an account of amazing things that happened. John calls them “signs,” meaning they point to something, they reveal something, in particular they reveal something about Jesus, who he is and what his purpose is. John tells us later that the purpose of these signs, the reason they’re written down is so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that you may have life in his name.

The signs themselves are all miraculous, all amazing, but there’s always something about them that subverts what the expectations were, how we might expect a sign to look. And this week, we come to an event—the so-called feeding of the five thousand—and a small, exhausted gesture of generosity that came with it, the impact of which went far beyond leftovers. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

They had to have been exhausted, and then to get a question like that.

Jesus and his disciples, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, see a crowd of people coming toward them who had followed them there. Jesus asked one of them, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Honestly that’s one of those questions that you could get mad at the person for even asking it. That’d be like going out on Nokomis right before trick or treating starts at Halloween—in normal years, that is—and asking, “So, where are we going to get enough candy for all the kids?” But that’s what Jesus asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” And you can almost hear the

exasperation in Philip's response: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

If there was a hint of frustration in Philip's voice—and I think there's a good chance there was—then I can't say I blame him. Not just because by any reasonable standard the question was an absurd one, but also because they themselves were exhausted and likely hungry—who among us is at our most agreeable when we're tired *and* hungry?

As we touched on briefly last week, Jesus moves quickly in the Gospel of John—or at least John moves him around quickly. The way John tells the story, Jesus had begun his ministry with his first sign in the town of Cana, in the region of Galilee to the north, then he and his disciples went down to Jerusalem—that's a trip of about 75 miles, walking. Then back up to Cana where he heals an official's son. Then back down to Jerusalem where he heals a sick man by a pool—that was last week. And now back up to Galilee where this crowd follows him into the wilderness. If you're keeping score, that four legs back and forth to Jerusalem from Galilee, for a grand total of 300 miles walking. Now as far as how much time passes over this span is a bit fuzzy, but clearly the way John is telling the story, Jesus is moving all over the place, and his disciples with him.

So this Jesus has dragged his disciples back and forth to Jerusalem *twice* now, leads them the 75 miles back up to Galilee, then over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and now has the nerve to ask them how they're going to feed this crowd. There are any number of reasons why they would be exhausted, hungry, and maybe even a little testy at this point, and then the one they're following has the gall to ask of them the impossible.

I like to imagine there's a bit of a frantic rush on the disciples' part to see what they can actually scrounge together, and in that rush, another disciple named Andrew notices a boy there with five barley loaves and two fish—one can only hope they asked the boy for his food or paid him for it—but Andrew raises the question that any of us would ask in such a situation: he sees the fives loaves and two fish, then he sees the 5,000 people huddled around them, and asks, "What are they among so many people?" They're already exhausted, then this impossible task is set before them. They run around to see what they could use, and all they find is a bit of bread and fish. They come back to Jesus, even more exhausted, as if to say, "There's no way this is enough, but this is all we got. It's yours."

Some of you may know this story already. Jesus blesses the loaves and fish, distributes them to the crowd, and miraculously the food doesn't run out. Everyone eats their fill, and there are even leftovers. This amazing sign of a crowd being fed, this seemingly absurd, impossible task, given the circumstances, and it begins with the exhausted offering just a few loaves and fish. It begins with someone saying, "There's no way this is enough, but this is all we got. It's yours."

It seems that exhausted offerings are more and more often the case these days. Early last week, Becky Guyton, our Office Manager whom many of you know, led our staff devotional. It had to do with tiredness and our need for Jesus, but also about this very story. I asked if I could share part of it—I've edited it down a bit:

“I feel safe saying that we are tired of COVID, but today I wanted to talk about being COVID tired. ...Even the most basic [thing] requires at least twice the work. Careful planning, ...screenings, reporting, sanitizing—and on top of that, what we do, how we do it, and where we do it is constantly changing. It’s no wonder that we’re exhausted a lot of the time! ...Jesus had sent the 12 [disciples] out to spread the gospel and heal the sick. When they returned, they were worn out.... [Finding a large crowd of people waiting] Jesus said to feed them...with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. They knew that what they had wasn’t enough. But Jesus took what they had and blessed it, and everyone ate and was satisfied.

“How are we handling it when we are worn out and the crowds show up to be fed?”

How are we handling it when we are worn out and the crowds show up to be fed? What a question. How are you handling it? You don’t have to be traveling in the wilderness or working in a church to feel it, not by a long shot. Everyone is tired, it seems. Weary of all of this. And understandably so. But it’d be a bit more bearable if we knew something like, oh just another little bit, then it’s over. We can’t say that. And so everything, whether it be stress at work, tension within your family, isolation from friends, anxiety about an election in two days, health struggles, mourning the loss of a loved one, or even the more mundane things like, how are we going to do trick-or-treating this year, and all of the demands that come with each and every one of those, at some point it starts to look like a crowd showing up, and someone turns to you and asks, “So how are you are going to feed all these people?”

So how are you handling it when you are worn out and the crowds show up to be fed? Because let’s be honest, we’re not always running on a full tank, not always at our best, in fact a lot of the time these days, we’re nowhere near what we would call our best, and what we have to offer out of our exhaustion is nowhere near what we would consider enough.

But isn’t it amazing the sort of things Christ can do with a bit of bread and a couple of fish, with these exhausted offerings, small gestures that seemingly wouldn’t make any difference?

John Perry, who’s a member of our church whom many of you know, shared with me an exchange he had last week, and I asked if I might share it with you. John lives at the Shannondale Senior Living Community and due to concerns for exposure requested an absentee ballot. Just last week, however, he got a phone call and learned that that request had been denied. Wasn’t anything shady or anything. The lady on the other end of the phone, the Knox County election official told him it was because a supervised remote voting session had already been hosted on-site at Shannondale that John had missed due to a doctor’s appointment. John was disappointed, sharing that this would be the first time in seventy years that he could not vote. She then suggested he might look into voting on election day, giving him the location of the voting precinct. He then shared his age and some concerns about going to the polling station, but at that point he figured she was going to brush him off and get to the next phone call on her list.

Except she didn’t.

He could hear her talking with some colleagues in the background, but she comes back and tells him, “We’ve decided you should get an absentee ballot. One is going to you in the mail in the morning.”

John tells her, “Hallelujah! You know it’s possible—just barely possible—that my one solitary vote might cause Tennessee’s electoral college to determine who the next president will be.” Now I know that barring some very surprising results on Tuesday, Tennessee’s electoral votes are not likely to be a big factor in the election, nor is one vote likely to change the way the state is leaning, but the effect of John’s vote or who he’s voting for isn’t the point.

The point is, this lady at the Elections Commission—and I have no idea who she is—but if she’s working at the Elections Commission, she is exhausted. And now, increasingly with each day getting closer to Tuesday, the crowds are coming and are wanting to be fed, so to speak. Out of her exhaustion, she could have brushed John off as someone who missed his chance to vote, not her problem, and moved on to the next phone call she had to make. But she didn’t. Instead she offered up the few loaves and fish she had, which were in this case, her ability to enable someone to vote, and as John told her, that single offering could have an enormous impact. Tired and worn out, she could have brushed him off, thinking it wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. That’s what she could’ve done. But instead she lifted up the small offering she had.

How are you handling it when you’re worn out and the crowds show up to be fed? Friends, when we take stock in the midst of our exhaustion and find that what we have to offer isn’t much at all, be it a single vote or a pledge to the church or an encouraging word or whatever it might be, when we do an inventory and find that all we have is a measly five loaves and two fish, and then we look at the sorts of challenges before us, there will be countless temptations to write it off as not being enough, as not making any difference. And when those temptations come, I pray you would remember the amazing power and impact that an exhausted offering can have.

And if these signs are meant to point us to something about Jesus, perhaps it is that in his hands, even the humblest of offerings can be put to miraculous work.

So as Becky Guyton put it, “...When you don’t think you have enough left to give, give Him what you have and ask Him to bless and multiply it.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.