

9th Sunday after Pentecost, July 15, 2021
Rev. Beth Anne Nelson

The first time I toured St. Dunstan's Church after receiving the call to serve as your curate, something struck me: this was a family church.

Later, when we came for Fr Roman's Installation, I had the sense that the members here were part of a large family together.

When I assisted with a wedding, a parishioner commented on how I would be called mother; another member of his family. It was such a beautiful moment.

Then, this week, I received a pleasant surprise. It was a delicious meal for our family. Moments like this help me to feel as though I am being welcomed into your church family.

Families come in all shapes and sizes.

There was once a missionary named Glenn Adist who served in China alongside his wife. They had their children with them. Now, obviously China is not a great place to be a missionary as Christians are regularly persecuted.¹ Yet, they persisted.

Now, I frequently tell my daughters that all actions have consequences: good or bad. For the Adist couple, the consequences were not good. They were put under house arrest. For three years, they were imprisoned in their house, and as you can imagine, they had collected things. This was back before computers and tablets, so they had books, lamps, toys, vases, and more. They had so much stuff. To be honest, what they probably thought was an abundance of stuff. One day, soldiers from the government came to tell the missionary and his wife that they would be released and returned to America. I imagine there was disappointment: the mission work had not gone well, but they were mostly rejoicing. They missed their families back home. If I were them I would have wanted a home cooked meal!

The soldiers told the couple there was one catch: they could only return to America with 200 additional lbs. Well, as I said, the family had

¹ See the article from Forbes which recently addresses persecution of Christians in China today. It is an opinion piece, however, it provides valuable insight.

an abundance of items. So, they got out the scales and started weighing, doing the math. Debating over blankets and nick-nacks. Finally, the day of departure arrived and the soldiers approached them and asked if they were ready. The mother and father enthusiastically replied that they were, in fact, prepared. The soldier, being a good military personnel, asked if they had weighed everything. The couple confirmed. Then the soldier took a look at all their bags, their family, and without missing a beat asked, “Did you weigh your children?”

Oh, wow. That one question changed everything. Suddenly all of their worldly possessions didn’t seem so important when they discovered the 200 pound limit included their children.

Sometimes what does not seem like enough is much more than enough.² That simple question, “Did you weigh your children?” put everything in perspective.

Friends, when we try to take Jesus on our terms; we are not willing to accept Jesus at all.³ The miracles of Christ are messy; they involve seeing abundance where most see scarcity. It is the very nature of hope itself.

Today, we see two stories about embracing the abundance God has given us in our lives. It might feel as though all we are talking about today is bread. In the Episcopal Church our scripture readings follow what is called the Revised Common Lectionary. For the next 5 weeks the gospel centers upon bread. My husband is an Episcopal priest, and together, we have nicknamed this the summer of bread. And not the warm, tasty, fresh baked sourdough kind so many people learned to make during the pandemic. Jesus wants to tell us who he is. He is the bread of life. Jesus is our daily bread.

Believing Jesus is the bread of life means that he is enough.

² This story is a retelling of Fred B. Craddock’s story in *Craddock Stories*. P.22-23. I gave it some new words, but the essence is the same. Reverend Dr. Craddock is a former professor and pastor.

³ This idea and line comes from Hoch, Robert. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-2/commentary-on-john-61-21-5>

Do we believe God's miraculous love for us is enough to sustain us in the most difficult of situations?⁴

If we answer yes, then that is reason to celebrate and feast.

Of course, we recognize the tragedies in our midst: the violence of war, the pain of hunger, the heartbreak of loneliness, and so much more. Simultaneously, we understand that God stands with us, calming the storms so we can connect with our Creator. God wants us to understand that we have enough in our lives.

Like the missionaries in our story from before, we have to take an inventory of the blessings God has given us. I think about the Adist children and the lives they touched after they returned home. Sometimes simple actions such as smiling, or loving each other can turn out to be great blessings. Bringing someone a meal can lift a huge burden in their lives. This week, our family was provided with two delicious meals from the church; and it was absolutely divine.

In the Ancient Near Eastern culture, where Jesus lived, meals were a time of sharing. In the early church, Christians would have an entire feast for their worship. That is why we see Paul admonishing new Christians to ensure that everyone gets enough food. The new church created by Christ's resurrection was profound in that it mixed classes of who ate together.

The Gospel of John as a whole, points to the tension between Jesus' methodology and the traditional religious establishment.⁵ The event we see Jesus taking part in is incredibly powerful. All of Jesus' meals were part of the concept of gathering together regularly.⁶ A meal forces someone to do this - whether a simple family dinner or a large gathering. Before Jesus, Jews ate with Jews. Gentiles ate with Gentiles. Samaritans ate with Samaritans. It would have been unusual for a rabbi, a learned man, to sit down to a meal as large as the one we hear about in the story with a diverse group of people. Nevertheless;

⁴ This is a rephrasing of the question Rev. Dr. Shoemaker poses in his article in *Christian Century*. H. Stephen Shoemaker. *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 2000, p. 715 <https://www.religion-online.org/article/bread-and-miracles-john-61-21/>

⁵ For a complete discussion on the Historical and Social Setting of the Gospel, see Dr. Gail O'Day's Gospel of John in *Women's Bible Commentary* pp.517-518.

⁶ *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. pp.506-507

everyone was a member of the Roman Empire. It is easy to understand the feelings of scarcity, of uncertainty, that occurred as each group felt they must look out for their own people.

The disciples take a tone of sarcasm; they seem to be joking with one another about the scarcity of the situation.

I think the disciples were focused on earthly concerns, their rumbling stomachs and the lack of resources. In the Bible, food is a symbol of covenant. Of perseverance in difficult times. Think of the Israelites in the desert, when God provided manna and quail. Think of Elisha, a mere prophet, who was able to stretch food for a hundred people. He took a lack of food and multiplied it.⁷ For this, and other efforts Elisha was known as a miracle worker. He took little and made it into much.

Still, Jesus had a larger crowd.

This crisis that Jesus found himself in must have been unimaginably stressful.

The second miracle has Jesus walking on water. In the other gospels accounts, the disciples fear Jesus is a ghost. Yet in John's account the disciples are afraid, but the greater emphasis is upon who Jesus is. Jesus is no ghost, he is God. Like God, Jesus can calm the chaos and fears of our lives. Water was a source of fear for the Israelites. They were talented people, but their talents were usually limited to dry land. So when God miraculously led Moses and Israel through the waters and out of Egypt, this was a powerful witness to God conquering their greatest fears. On the Sea of Galilee the disciples glimpse the fullness of God's presence in Jesus.

Both miracles deal with fear. The disciples are afraid of a storm, and in the miraculous feeding they are hungry and fear they don't have enough. The feeding of the 5,000 is nearly Eucharistic: we have bread, we have fish. Jesus takes it, and blesses it. He multiplies the resources; and all are fed.

There really is a similarity between this scene and the last supper: both are a celebration of Christ. Both gatherings included a

⁷ *New Interpreter's Bible: Volume III* (1999) Nashville. Abbingdon.

miracle where Jesus takes something ordinary and transformed it into something extraordinary. Both gatherings include taking something small and making them abundant.

When we take the bread, intinc it into the wine, it is our small reminder that Christ is with us. It is a reminder that we are to love each other, because we each are made in God's image.⁸

In some ways, the first miracle we hear about today combined with the story of The Wedding at Cana in Chapter Two, where Jesus made abundance out of scarcity.⁹ The two of these come together to make a Eucharist Passover.

This meal hints that Jesus breaks bread with his disciples in the upper room at the Passover. John's Gospel, the only Gospel to place the feeding of the multitude at this time, emphasizes the breaking down of social construction. The significance here is that the feast is available for all. There is always enough. What seems ordinary: loaves and fishes; these are the things that Jesus can make into a feast greater than we have ever seen.¹⁰

In our Epistle reading today, Paul tells us to give glory to God who can do more than we ask or imagine. I say this as prayer regularly; and it is the same idea the Adist family had when they looked at their children. They had an abundance, more than they could imagine, but they didn't realize how much God could do in their lives, until they were asked if their 200 pounds calculation included their children.

When Jesus looked at his disciples, he knew that this crowd had an abundance of God's grace.

Here in our St. Dunstan's family, we have an abundance. An abundance of joy from the shepherding ministry when they bring someone delicious meals. An Abundance of Comfort from the pastoral care team. An abundance of knowledge from our Christain formation teachers. An abundance of evangelism from our Newcomers ministry.

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979). The Catechism: God the Father. p.846

⁹ O'Day. Gospel of John in *Women's Bible Commentary* p.520.

¹⁰ Hoch, Robert. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-2/commentary-on-john-61-21-5>

An abundance of joyful noise from our choir and praise team. An abundance of youthful energy from our children and youth programs.

In fact, I suspect we have many more areas of abundance that we haven't even noticed yet. Maybe when we fear we don't have enough, God is gently reminding us not to be afraid. God is gently reminding us that we have more than enough.

We have an abundance, enough to grow and feed this community with the love of God. May we go forth from this place focused not on what we lack. Instead, may we go forth rejoicing in the power of God to take our meager offerings and turn them into blessings of abundance. Amen.