



“And a Little Child Shall Lead...”
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 2024 (“VBS Sunday”)
John 6:1-21
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

We all know the story of today’s Gospel reading. It is one of the best-loved, in part because it is one of the few stories about Jesus that all four of the Gospels tells in pretty much the same way – the so-called feeding of the 5,000.

Who is the source of this miracle? Ultimately the triune God. But let’s dig deeper, placing ourselves at the scene.

Jesus knew what was going to happen, but he feigns ignorance. From their mountain retreat the disciples see huge crowds gathering waiting for Jesus to appear. Jesus innocently asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Why does he say this? He’s not playing games with them; he wants to get the wheels in their brains turning. Unlike the Exodus story, food is not going to fall from the sky. They will need to DO something, in order for what Jesus knows is going to happen to be fulfilled.

Now the disciples have come down and are wandering among the crowd. They begin to despair; great hunger could lead to an unruly gathering. In the meantime, Andrew has spotted a boy with a lunch basket. We imagine the boy was keeping it hidden under his cloak, because otherwise people might be demanding he share. Yet sharp-eyed Andrew has taken note. Excitedly he reports to Jesus: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish!” Then he immediately second-guesses himself: “But what are they among so many people?”

Nonetheless, Andrew’s report is what Jesus needed. The disciples have acted. They observed the scene, saw the boy, and realized that this might be a solution, although they couldn’t envision how.

Now Let’s ask again: Who is the source of this miracle? Not Jesus, not Andrew, but the child. The triune God performed the miracle, but it could only have happened because of this boy. The boy whose mother knew it could be a long day. The boy who was willing to share his lunch with Jesus. The boy who did not resist or refuse. The boy who somehow knew that although he might go hungry, his gift would help Jesus.

This well-reported episode needs the boy because Jesus needs us. Without the boy, without us, God’s kingdom will become stalled in its inbreaking. Jesus needs us. He is not a magician – he can’t wave a wand to make things happen. He needs us, our effort, our flesh and blood, to attend to a hungry world.

And in this case Jesus needed a child, because children have the ability to lead us into new life where we adults often cannot figure out what to do.

In our VBS, the youngest child was an incredibly cute little fellow who was also very lively, a free spirit whose joy in life bursts out all over. Our task was how to channel this energy into our group situations. We might have been challenged had it not been for a few of our older youth.

They took him under their wing and became the friend he needed. They cuddled with him. They took walks with him. They sprinted up and down the narthex with him. They brought him Gerald the comfort giraffe. They attended to his every need and, because of their loving care, this sweet boy ended up having a wonderful time, and so did we. No one asked these older kids to help out. They heard God telling them it was the right thing to do. They offered gifts of love.

Now let's think back to the boy in John 6. How did he feel when one of Jesus's special friends came up to him and asked him to share his lunch with Jesus? It had to be in the ask. Andrew surely did not grab the basket out of the boy's hands. He probably said, "You see that man up there? If you are willing to give him your lunch, he will do something very special with it." The boy must have been thrilled. When he reached Jesus, we imagine Jesus leaning over to him and whispering, "Do you want to see what God can do with this gift you are giving me?" Oh, yes!!

Imagine the hush that fell over the crowd. Jesus held up the two loaves and thanked his Father. Then the loaves and fish kept coming until everyone ate fully, more than enough for all 5,000 people – just as in our invitation to communion, when we hear, "Christ has set the table with more than enough for all. Come!"

People like to use the word "miracle" in referring to the feeding of the 5,000. Maybe, when viewed from the outside, but we recognize that this is what the Holy Spirit does with anything we offer up to God for the well-being of the world. The boy must have been thrilled to see what happened because of what he gave to Jesus, and from what I could tell, this was what our VBS youth felt who shepherd our small boy through the week. They never thought twice. They never second-guessed. They offered love, and it flowed out and around to all of us. When we finally said goodbye to the little guy on Thursday night, there were lots of hugs all around.

What is concealed under your cloak that you could offer to Jesus? Which he would then lift to his Father in thanksgiving and which the Spirit would then multiply in a way you never could have imagined?

As we move toward a new ministry year, I am challenging each of you to come up with something new that you can give to Jesus, for him to lift up for the blessing of the world. Something that sparks in you the feeling of new life and new hope. A new idea through which the Spirit can grow whatever it is you are bringing.

If you find yourself thinking, "But I can't, I'm worn out from what I'm already doing," let me suggest that those activities might no longer be life-giving for you. If so, find a way to let them go. Reach under your cloak to uncover something that you had forgotten about or didn't even realize you had. Then, through the church, offer it to God for the life of the world.

And why should you do this? Why not just come to church, go home, and come back next week? Because of what Jesus has done for us. We must never lose sight of it.

What did Jesus do for us? Our Sunday School and VBS children will quickly tell you that "Jesus died for our sins," but there is so much more to it than that.

This past week at the conference I attended I was astonished to discover this all over again in a performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's St. John Passion. In this magnificent work we follow

Jesus' suffering and death through John's account, and finally arrive at the foot of cross. The chorales sing of our heartfelt responses to theological truths that are profound yet easily within our grasp, such as:

- "So that I can be unbound from the snares of my sins, Jesus is bound; to heal me, he lets himself be wounded."
- "I, I, and my sins, which are as countless as grains of sand on the seashore, have caused you this misery and torment."
- "It is through your imprisonment, Son of God, that freedom comes to us."
- "Had you not assumed worldly servitude, our servitude to sin would have been eternal."
- And especially for us today, in the penultimate chorale: "Help us, Christ, to consider fruitfully the reason for your death; in return, poor and weak though we are, may we give you thank-offerings."

His death, our life, lifted to God, for the salvation of the world.

May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.