

SERMON, August 6, 2023, First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield

Title: “God’s Abundance,” Rev. Dr. Janet E. Wolfe

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-5, (Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21), (Rom. 9:2-5). Matthew 14:13-21

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 plus appears in all four Gospels. That shows how important it was at the time. We need to look at the context, the place and time that it is set and what else was going on. According to Matthew, Jesus had just received word of the execution of John the Baptist and that is why he and his disciples withdrew to a desert place to pray. This may be a reference to the Exodus wandering in the wilderness, where God fed the multitudes with manna and quail to sustain them on their journey. In the story from Matthew, crowds followed Jesus and his disciples into the deserted place to hear more about Jesus’ teaching and healing. In the wilderness, there was no place to buy food and they had been there for quite a long time. It was now evening according to the story. The disciples said to Jesus that the people would need to go and buy food. “You feed them,” Jesus said. “And how are we supposed to do that, given that we only have five loaves and two fish?” the disciples asked. Jesus told them to try anyway. They circulated baskets of food and behold the whole crowd was able to eat their fill and there were still twelve baskets left over.

There is quite a bit of number symbolism in the story: seven, as in the loaves and fishes, was considered a complete number. Twelve, in the baskets left over, represents the twelve tribes of Israel. All of this points to God’s abundance. I think that we do not need to take a post-Enlightenment view and try to show how this multiplication could have literally happened. Some say that the crowd was inspired by Jesus and contributed what food they had so that all would have something to eat. Others say it was part of Jesus’ unique powers. Fundamentalists say it was just as described, a feeding miracle. We will do better to look for the theological-metaphorical meaning than the literal meaning.

This church has many projects that help to feed the hungry. We have long supported the creation of a food pantry and now we house Soup or Socks. During the school year, we participate in the Nutrition on Weekends program of United Way. Many of you help to pack food for children who might not have enough to eat on weekends when they cannot depend on school lunches.. I think that Soup or Socks includes a box of treats for the children when a family comes in for food in the summer. We will soon be advertising the CROP Walk against hunger, which will take place September 24. We will need donations and walkers. Last week Vacation Bible School tie-dyed T-shirts for the walk. Gardeners from our Community Garden are encouraged to share some of their produce, and we have the Harvest Table, where anyone with abundance of produce can share it with others at worship. While I was working on this sermon on Friday, my neighbor brought a bag of produce from her garden on the

family farm to share with me. In March, we participate in Empty Bowls, which is a fund-raiser for Soup or Socks, with each participant entitled to a ceramic bowl made by a local potter.

The Arpin church, where I used to be pastor, has a strong commitment to feeding ministry. Several of them help with SOS. One person has a long ministry of keeping track of how far she walks every year and then asks the congregation to contribute so much a mile to the CROP Walk. They usually have the largest contribution of any church other than FPC Marshfield and Faith Lutheran. They often have community meals, which are delicious and which serve as fundraisers for other projects of the church. In 1993, a group of us went to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Conference in Colorado. Then twelve year old Josh Smith attended a breakout class. They were asked what congregations do to make people feel welcome. He said, "We feed 'em." Thirty years later, Josh still attends church and has several children who participate. I recently attended a funeral in Arpin and partook of the lunch that was offered. I have never known the women to run out of food when serving a meal. I used to say that they could give Jesus lessons in feeding the 5,000!

In a few minutes, we will share in the Lord's Supper, also called communion or the Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving." The feeding of the 5,000 is one of the models for communion. In the story, Jesus takes the loaves and fishes, blesses and breaks them and asks the disciples to distribute them to the people. They ate until they were full, and there were still twelve baskets left.

We so often think only of the Last Supper, but there are many other symbols for communion.. The feeding of the 5,000 perhaps represents the meal of the kingdom, the promise of divine renewal of all creation. Signs of the kingdom are visible when the grace of God is present and humans work for justice, love, and peace. Our prayers suggest a vision of the communion of saints through the ages taking part as we celebrate the feast of the kingdom. Our sharing of the bread and cup symbolize the presence of the whole creation at our feast. The bread and wine are drawn from nature, part of the produce of the earth. Grain is used for the bread, and the vine, with its grapes, is used for the wine.

Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners is another symbol for communion. Jewish law was quite strict about who was a suitable table companion. Jesus accepted all kinds of people. He even called some of the tax collectors and sinners to be his disciples. This is because Jesus believed that all people were created in the image of God so all are welcome. Likewise, we welcome all. No one will be turned away. It took Presbyterians a while to welcome children to the table, but in 1972, the Book of Order was changed to welcome all baptized children to the table. In recent years, we have even dropped the baptismal requirement. I am quite sure that people have participated in communion in our church who are not baptized. Again, one way of welcoming people is to feed them. You will find a statement about this in your bulletin. We do not come because we are worthy, but because we are in

need of God's blessing and grace. The faithful invited to seek reconciliation for any conflict or division between them and their neighbors as we come to the table.

We believe that Christ is present in the meal, in the whole liturgy, not just in the bread and wine. We also believe that it is Christ's table, not ours, so therefore it is important not to exclude anyone. When we use the word "remembrance," it is not just something that happened 2,000 years ago, but something that refers to the past, present and future. The word in Greek is *anamnesis*, which has a timeless quality about it.

In the past in the Reformed tradition, we tended to follow Zwingli, who believed that the Word was more important than the sacrament, and who believed that we were only commemorating something that happened a long time ago. Therefore, we celebrated it infrequently, usually quarterly. Now most Presbyterian churches celebrates it monthly, and I know a few that celebrate it weekly. That is what is recommended in the liturgical reforms of the past few years. Calvin would like to have had weekly communion but was unable to convince the city fathers of Geneva. So he made an effort to see that it was celebrated in at least one of the churches every week.

Our Hebrew Scripture lesson for today is from the third part of Isaiah, as the Israelites were returning from exile. It also lifts up God's abundance. It is an invitation to come, buy and eat, even with no money. Everyone is invited to the banquet table. There is plenty for everyone. Yet we have a habit of wasting our resources for non-essentials instead of what we really need. The covenant with David calls Israel to reach out to all the nations. God is not just for Israel but is for everyone in creation. Later verses suggest that all should return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them and abundantly pardon them.

As we prepare to come to the table, let us remember those who do not have enough to eat, of which there are many in the world. Ukraine is one of the breadbaskets of the world, raising a lot of grain. Yet the Russians, after allowing it to be shipped to needy places in the world, are now blocking these shipments and even destroying some of the grain. I have seen several news reports in recent days of the shortage of food and donations for the World Food Program of the United Nations. It is partly donor fatigue, but that does not lessen the need.

Let us pray: God of abundance, help us to remember all those who do not have enough to eat. Touch us so that we may be generous with those who we are called to serve so that all may be fed, even as Jesus fed the multitudes in our story. We pray in his name. Amen.

