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The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12), Year B
29 July 2018
John 6:1-21
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

'But what are they among so many people?'

In the name of God: + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As an undergraduate I studied economics, though I must admit that was not my initial plan. My true love and main area of study was political science, especially anything related to European politics, but somewhere along the line I became convinced that studying economics would enhance my understanding of political science. Politics and economics are, of course, so very bound up together, so it was a logical pairing. At the same time, I also quite enjoyed the academic study of economics. Like many first-year college students, I first encountered the discipline in Economics 101. I quickly became enchanted with the models and principles that economists used to make sense of the world. Everything fit very neatly, and economists seemed to have answers for everything. We rarely pushed at any of the often unreasonable assumptions that supported and held the theories together. I think I found comfort in the illusion of certainty that economics offered, even if I knew deep down that life was not so easily packaged and explainable by such models.

Though the world of economics made sense to me, I also understood why for many it could never be anything but the 'the dismal science,' as one historian once famously called it. Economists seem to be in the business of offering rather grim predictions, most of which emerge from the discipline's foundation on the principle of scarcity. Economists take as a given that there isn't enough to go around. One of my favorite professors offered a definition of microeconomics that has stuck with me through the years. He told us microeconomics is 'the allocation of scarce

resources to alternative ends.’ There are a limited number of resources that must be distributed for various purposes. Scarcity is written into the definition itself.

Of course, it’s not only economists who view the world from a perspective of scarcity. We all acknowledge it and are controlled by it in our own ways. There never seems to be enough to go around. There isn’t enough time, enough money, or enough energy to do what must be done. Our culture is always telling us we don’t have enough stuff. We are supposed to believe that we always need more, that what we currently have is insufficient. If only we had the latest item, the newest gadget, then we would be okay. A perspective of scarcity easily invites fear. We fear that there will never be enough, so we begin to guard more closely what we do have. Scarcity has a way of blocking out generosity and joy. Though this view may dominate much of our thinking, I’m not convinced that it is the only way to view the world.

Today’s very familiar gospel passage has a different story to tell about scarcity and the nature of God’s kingdom. But before we get there, we must acknowledge that a major shift has occurred since we gathered last week. You may remember that we have been reading through the gospel according to Mark in this season after Pentecost. Our lectionary is arranged in a three-year cycle, and we focus on one Synoptic gospel each year, Matthew, Mark, then Luke. That leaves the gospel of John to be dispersed at appropriate times throughout the three years, especially in the seasons of Lent and Easter. Today we have come to another time in our three-year cycle in which we read from the gospel of John. For the next five weeks we will focus on the sixth chapter of John in which Jesus offers an extended discourse on the bread of life. The shift from Mark to John is rather like moving from one country to another, even if the differences may not be as immediately obvious to us. Before we move into the world of John’s gospel, we need to briefly orient ourselves.

The gospel of John is distinctly unique from the three Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptics present a narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. They tell a story. Matthew and Luke, for example, begin with the familiar and lovely story of Jesus' birth and the start of his ministry. Mark begins by saying, 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' John's priority, on the other hand, is to tell the reader something about the character of Jesus Christ and who he is. John begins not with a story of the birth of a child but by placing Jesus within a cosmic setting in the majestic words of the prologue— 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, ...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.' Beginning with these words from the prologue, the gospel of John presents a distinctly high Christology, meaning that there is a strong focus on the divinity of Jesus. In John, Jesus tells no parables but he does many 'signs' that serve to say showing about both who Jesus is and also about the new reality he initiates. The first half of John is filled with these signs, including such familiar stories as the changing of water to wine at the wedding at Cana, the raising of Lazarus, and the story of the loaves and fishes we hear today.

It begins by noting that Jesus had been teaching and healing, and these signs had not gone unnoticed. People were drawn to Jesus and wanted to follow him and know more. It seems a large crowd had been following Jesus for some time, and they had now come to a mountain and it was the time of the day to eat a meal. Jesus turns to Philip and asks him where they might find bread to feed all of these people. Jesus already knew what we would do, but he asked Philip the question to test him. Philip's response may ring familiar in our ears — 'six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' Philip's answer is simple: there isn't enough, not even enough to give them a tiny amount. It is a reasonable and logical response.

As Jesus was talking with Philip, another disciple, Andrew, had been searching to see what was available. He found a young boy who had with him five barley loaves and two fish. It was likely the boy's food for the day. It wasn't much. It probably wouldn't even satisfy the boys' need, but it would at least dull some of the pangs of hunger that he knew all too well. Andrew found this boy, and he brought him to Jesus. Yet like Philip, Andrew knew that it was insufficient. There was some bread and fish, 'but what are they among so many people' (John 6:9). Andrew asks the question even though he knows the answer. It is insignificant, not even enough for a child much less that of the thousands gathered to see this amazing person called Jesus and the signs he had done.

As always, Jesus loved the people. They were like a sheep without a shepherd, so he invited them to sit down. The gospel writer even takes care to note that there was 'a great deal of grass in the place.' As the people sat down, Jesus took the food and offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the bounteous gifts of the earth. Perhaps Jesus prayed the traditional Jewish blessing over bread, 'Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.' After giving thanks, he gave the bread and the fish to all who were seated, and the people ate. And they didn't just get a few morsels. No, they ate 'as much as they wanted' (John 6:11). They ate until they were satisfied, and even then there was still some remaining, so much that the disciples filled twelve baskets (John 6:12-13).

In our post-Enlightenment context, I fear that this story becomes a stumbling-block when we get stuck on the question of 'how' and make Jesus more magician than savior. It is curious to see how the people present with Jesus responded. When they saw 'the sign he had done' (John 6:14), the people didn't wonder how this had happened but who might this person be. They recognized that Jesus was truly someone special and thought he must be 'the prophet who is to

come into the world.’ The miraculous story of the feeding, like all of Jesus’ signs in John, tell us something about who Jesus is, and the testimony of John is that he is the Word made flesh, the very Son of God. This sign also points beyond itself to tell us something about the new reality Jesus introduces, what we often refer to as the kingdom of God. The feeding of the five thousand shows us that God’s kingdom is one of radical abundance. In the face of our claim that there isn’t enough – ‘what are they among so many?’ – Jesus responds by showing us that there is enough and even more. The people eat and are satisfied, and there is still more remaining. Jesus takes our view of scarcity and turns it on its head, exposing it as the fallacy that it is.

The promise of abundance in God’s kingdom is about so much more than just material provision. Jesus says throughout John’s gospel that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). The abundance of God’s kingdom, the idea that there is truly enough, reaches right to the core of our being and tells us that we are enough, just as we are. For some of us, that might be the most difficult thing to believe about today’s gospel. We are surrounded by messages of inadequacy, and our culture is always seeking to tell us we aren’t enough – skinny enough, smart enough, rich enough, interesting enough, the list goes on. In the face of the relentless tide of these messages, the voice of Jesus rises above and tells us, ‘you are enough.’ We are rooted and grounded in a love that has such a ‘breadth and length and height and depth’ that it ‘surpasses knowledge’ (Ephesians 3:18-19)

I wonder what it would look like for us to begin to view the world from the perspective, not of scarcity, but from that of God’s radical abundance. To do so does not mean that we ignore the realities of being human in the twenty-first century, of having bills to pay, jobs to do, and limited time. It is not an escape from reality but rather seeing the world as it truly is in God’s creation. Living from the perspective of abundance begins to loosen the chains of scarcity and

opens us to see the bounty that is before us, even though it might not match our expectations or come from expected places. I imagine the disciples didn't think the means of satisfying the hunger of so many would come from the offerings of a young boy. Few would have expected a young child to have anything of value to offer. Perhaps we are guilty of the same expectation in our own day. Life in God's kingdom is about believing, even when it seems naïve and impossible, that God has and will continue to provide so that what we need is here among us. Though Andrew's question rings through the ages in many forms, 'but what are they among so many people,' we hear the voice of Jesus speaking truth to us— it is enough; you are enough. Amen.