

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

30 July 2006

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

I'll try to spare you the reasons why, but one of the more important movies of my adolescent years was the movie *Oliver*. And the scene that's playing in my mind at the moment is very nearly an opening scene. Long rows of tables filled with young boys, each of them dressed in rags, each of them frantically eating porridge – not necessarily because it was good. And even if it was, what young boy delights in eating a bowl of porridge? No, it's obvious from the very opening bell that these boys don't get much, and they're intent on wolfing down what they do get just as fast as they can, because they know it's all they're going to get. It won't be enough to take away the gnawing in their stomachs, but it's all they're going to get, so they better be scarfing it down while it's in front of them. And of course, the moment that introduces us to the main character is when one little blonde haired boy breaks from the crowd, picks up his bowl and confidently walks to the serving counter. He holds out and lifts up his empty bowl, and very politely, softly, sweetly, says, Please, sir, I'd like some more. To which this large, over-stuffed buffoon of a warden bellows back, MORE??? At which point pure pandemonium breaks out.

Young boys and food. All sorts of images and possibilities come to mind with that combination. Pretty clear about what they like and what they don't like. Granola bars are a favorite snack, but only one brand, maybe only one flavor; no substitutions, please. Macaroni and cheese is a sure hit – as long as it's orange and comes out of a box. And whether they're in a growth spurt or not makes all the difference in how much they eat. They may pick and poke and slide it around with a fork, or better yet, tuck it under the lip of the plate in the vain hope that you won't notice; or they may gobble down every morsel you put in front of them and still be back to raid the refrigerator later. Some days you know what the rules are and what to expect, and some days you just have to sit back and let it unfold, because anything's possible.

Of all the potential scenarios of young boys and food, the one in today's gospel lesson seems one of the least likely. Not that we really know what the deal was with this particular boy or this particular set of interchanges, but I can't come up with one that feels predictable. Picture Jesus, seated on a mountain top with his disciples. He had trouble moving for all of the crowd that followed him everywhere he went, excited about the miracle worker and what unprecedented thing he might do next. Jesus and his disciples were seated and trying to have a conversation, but the crowds just kept streaming in. North, south, east and west – they pressed in from every direction. That seemed to happen all the time these days, but now that the Passover was near, there were more Jews on the move than ever, and the crowd was simply overwhelming. Somewhere in the midst of it, Jesus turned to Philip with something of a twinkle in his eye. He had a plan, but wanted to see if Philip could guess what it was, so he turned to him and asked,

where are we going to buy bread for this crowd? Philip didn't honestly seem all that concerned with the where – because he was so focused on the how. Six months wages wouldn't buy enough bread for this crowd! It wouldn't really matter if there were three Hannaford's, Shaw's and Walmart Super Stores in town, we couldn't possibly gather up enough money to buy what we'd need for everyone in this crowd to even get a crust. At which point, Andrew piped up with the only information he had to offer, pathetic though it was. There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish... I don't see that that helps any, but it was something to say when there was nothing else to say.

So tell me about that boy. Maybe his mother had packed him something he really couldn't stomach eating, so why not give it away? He wasn't going to eat it! Or maybe he'd never intended to share it; was in fact working frantically to keep it tucked away so he wouldn't have to share it, but Andrew had seen the bag and the oil markings on the side of it and had wondered what he had in there. Or maybe he just felt moved in the presence of this amazing, gentle, miracle working, love offering man to offer what he had and do what he could, so he tentatively had approached Andrew and said, it isn't much, but if it will help, here's something. And just to add to the range of possibilities, let me share with you one more option that I stumbled upon in one of my books of worship resources. It's entitled, "Just a housewife"

I packed five cakes and two small fishes,
Sent him off, my youngest lad,
To take his father's dinner to the field.

Came back alone he did, all goggle-eyed.

My fresh-baked bread that varmint gave away
To some young traveling preacher out of Galilee.
It fed five thousand people. What a tale!

It can't be true... but if it is...
What kind of dough did these hands knead
This morning?

(Cordelia Baker-Pearce, *Resources for Preaching Worship, Year B*, page 191)

I don't have a clue if it was his own lunch or his father's dinner, his offering or Andrew's confiscating, but I do know that Jesus took those five barley loaves and gave thanks over them, broke them and distributed them among the 5,000 people who were seated around him. And then he did the same with the two fish. And every person there had as much as they wanted. Once their appetites and their needs were satisfied, Jesus sent the disciples back out to gather up the fragments so that nothing would be thrown out or wasted, and there were enough leftovers to fill 12 baskets.

What good could five small dinner rolls and two pathetic fish do in the face of 5,000 hungry people? What's the point? Why bother? The best they could possibly expect to do was point them in a potential direction for food and wish them well. Maybe the gods would smile on them and they'd find something to eat before nightfall. What difference could one young boy's lunch make in the presence of such staggering need? What difference can one person make in ministering to the thousands upon thousands of homeless people in this country, or the pandemic of AIDS that's

ravaging Zimbabwe and much of Africa, or the devastation of yet more violence and bloodshed in Lebanon and the Middle East, or the mountains of rubble and contamination still growing mold in New Orleans nearly a year after Katrina tore through, or even the numbers of school children in Derry who go to school in the morning without breakfast, not because they slept late or didn't like what was on the table, but because nothing was on the table? What can we possibly hope to do? What's the point of trying and failing? In the face of those sorts of needs and limited resources, why bother to try and do anything?

One writer says:

Much of the time our faith mirrors that of Philip and Andrew, who could not see past the six months' wages or the meager five loaves and two fish. We tend to base our living on our own scarcity or even on our own fears of insufficiency. So we hoard and save and worry and end up living life in small and safe measures. We pull back when we should push forward. We give in to our fear of a shortfall rather than exercising faith in God's abundance. But Christians are constantly on call to go places where we have never been, to do things that we have never attempted and to be things we have never envisioned. (Charles Hoffman, *The Christian Century*, July 25, 2006, page 18)

What would a world grounded in an understanding of abundance look like in comparison with one based on our fears and assumptions of scarcity? What difference might it make if we freely, maybe even boldly, offered up the crumbs that we have to the miraculous multiplication tables by which God operates in the world? What could we accomplish if we dared to rise from our place at the table, step forward to the serving counter, risk the scorn, mockery and ridicule of the ways of the world, and dare to ask for more – more for the emptiness and haunting places of need among us and within us – confident in the abundance that flows from the gracious hand of God? In the face of all the world's need, what good could five barley loaves and two fish possibly do? If we don't ask the question or bring forward the offering, we're not likely to ever know the answer.