

“Magic and Meal: The Calling of a Community”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

Every year, school begins with a set of rituals. The newcomers are escorted in horse-drawn carriages. Returning students sit at their assigned tables, faced by the faculty. With some opening words and then a wave of a wand from the headmaster, fine tablecloths and goblets materialize and platters and plates suddenly appear out of thin air, filled with dish after dish piled high with food. With a bit of magic and a fantastic meal, the school community is called into being. And then the adventures of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley at Hogwarts School of Magic begin again.

A magical feast, with food appearing out of nowhere, and strangers becoming friends. Everyone who had heard about Jesus knew this story. A version of these events appears in all four of the gospels. It is a story of Jesus teaching and a gathered crowd growing hungry. A few loaves and a couple fish.

Mark begins the story with Jesus and the disciples going away in a boat to a deserted place where they can rest for a while. But many people saw them going and recognized them and hurried there on foot and arrived ahead of them. So by the time Jesus went ashore, a huge crowd had gathered, waiting attentively for him. Clinging to every word he spoke. And then it got late, and the disciples told Jesus to send them away so the crowd could go buy something to eat.

Instead, Jesus told them “you give them something to eat.” They complain about how much it would cost them to buy enough food, but Jesus instructs them to find out how many loaves they can find. They report that they have only five loaves and two fish. A huge crowd and just five loaves and two fish – “such a mismatch of needs and resources.”<sup>1</sup> But you know the rest of the story. How five loaves and two fish are distributed and somehow it becomes enough. More than enough. It was a mystery – a sign of God’s amazing grace. Everyone was satisfied, so much so that when the ushers started cleaning up and passing the baskets around, they filled twelve of them with leftovers.

I love this piece by John August Swanson, *Loaves and Fishes*.<sup>2</sup> If you like the piece on your bulletin cover, make sure you see the full size original in our Friendship Room, for the details are splendid. Look at the brilliant robes and the expressions on people’s faces, the crowd pressed in on one another. John wrote that he wanted this image to honor native peoples in many parts of the world – those who work the land for their livelihood, and have lived for generations in small communities or villages.

Am I the only one here today who wonders what exactly happened on that day long ago when crowds came out from their small villages and gathered around Jesus in a deserted place? How did Jesus feed them? Was it magic?

John Dominic Crossan says magicians were common in Jesus’ time and that magic and meal, miracle and table were at the very heart of Jesus’ program.<sup>3</sup> Biblical scholar Ched Myers explains that the story is not one act of hocus-pocus, but is instead about an alternative economy, encouraged by Jesus.

Twice the disciples suggest to Jesus that the solution to the hunger of the crowds is to “buy” food [Myers points out]. . . Instead he determines the available resources, organizes the consumers into groups, pronounces the blessing and distributes what is at hand. We should be clear that there is nothing “supernatural” reported to have transpired in this feeding of some five thousand men; only that “they all ate and were satisfied.” The only “miracle” here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.<sup>4</sup>

So these two biblical scholars whose words appear on the bulletin cover emphasize that Jesus’ words and actions about eating point directly and deliberately at a different way of being community than one noted for patronage and clientage and the honor and shame that come from a society of extremes between the haves and have-nots.<sup>5</sup> And it is still a countercultural story. We think we can buy whatever we need. We are taught that whatever hungers we have can be eased by shopping. And Jesus says, you “give them something to eat.” No need to go out and buy food - start with what you already have. And so they found five loaves and two fish and all had enough.

But that still does not explain how five loaves and two fish became enough to feed a crowd of thousands. I can’t explain what happened that day in the large crowd. It was a miracle. It’s not easy to explain miracles. Maybe Jesus magically divided up the bread, multiplying it in a way that had fish jumping out of the Sea of Galilee into people’s laps.

In John’s version of this story (John 6:1-15) the disciples notice that a boy had the five loaves and two fish. Maybe it took a child to begin the miracle of multiplication. Maybe the child’s example taught the others how to share. Great generosity often begins that way, you know. Maybe the boy who shared his five loaves and two fish was a catalyst. The others saw that he was willing to share his food, and they reached into their pockets, and into their bags, and they pulled out bags of food that they were hoping to eat alone, after the others had left.

There are rules to our eating. Peter Farb and George Armelagos, in their book Consuming Passions: the Anthropology of Eating, write,

In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is a primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. Once the anthropologist finds out where, when and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about relations among the society’s members.<sup>6</sup>

This story emphasizes that following Jesus is not something that you do as an individual and then everyone splits up and goes their separate ways. It is not about coming in, getting yourself healed and taught, and then heading home to find your own food and your own way. It is about a crowd that finds itself a community. It is about the molding of thousands of individuals into a movement that would live out Jesus’ parables. It is about a gathering of people who had looked for any place on the ground clear enough to spread out their own picnic blanket and close enough to hear Jesus suddenly finding themselves looking each other in the face and smiling as the bread and fish were passed around. It was about people who normally would eat as much as they wanted or could afford suddenly realizing how big the group was and holding back a little, taking less than they might have, to make sure that everyone had enough.

It really is one of the most shocking parts of the Bible. So often we only eat with people who look like us, agree with us on most issues, who share a common blood, or lifestyle, or approach to life. And in the Bible, strangers become friends, and the least and the lost mingle as equals with those used to privilege sharing the same fine linen and the best food prepared by master chefs. The miracle happens as Jesus arranges them in groups of hundreds and fifties (6:40) and a little bit of food becomes enough.

The story is so shocking that it repeats itself. Just two chapters later in Mark (8:1-10) “there was again a great crowd.” And again, they were without anything to eat. Once again, the disciples ask Jesus where they are going to get enough food. Even the first disciples needed multiple reminders that God’s ways are ruled by abundance, not scarcity. And that in the kingdom Jesus described, fear is replaced with faith.

It is a kingdom that brings together people from all corners of the world. It is a kingdom marked by peaceful coexistence – not just the absence of conflict and strife – but justice and peace and dignity and beauty and grace. Where all who are hungry have enough to eat.

God’s kingdom, already visible here on earth, Jesus emphasized, can turn lives upside down. We find our values challenged and our notions of who is acceptable suddenly changed as others sit down next to us at church. Every time we receive new members into this church, the status quo is threatened. For new members bring new talents and interests. If we welcome them, we risk being challenged and changed and enhanced. Today we celebrate as well the sacrament of baptism.

Life in God’s kingdom does not mean that we will be protected from all evil and from pain. Far from it, for even in baptism, we know that we are baptized into the ways of Jesus, and Jesus was not one to flinch in the face of pain and suffering and even betrayal. Jesus told his followers, those who had been healed and helped and included, that they would also have to take up their cross if they wanted to follow him. God’s kingdom, magnificent as it is, has different rules and regulations that the kingdoms we find ourselves in on a daily basis.

“My image of *Loaves and Fishes*,” John August Swanson wrote, Emphasizes and reminds us of the basic needs of all humanity. We all share the need for food and for providing for our families and communities. If we take the cosmic view, that there currently exists enough of what we need to sustain the world, we urgently need to consider sharing the resources that have been entrusted to us.

We will never get it exactly right. In the church you will see the best of people and the worst of people as we try and fail and try again to live up to our ideals and the teachings of Jesus. It took the disciples multiple magical feedings before they understood Jesus. But here at this church, as we gather for worship, and as we eat together, we get a little closer. Here strangers become friends, the food is magical, and all find God’s welcome. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Anna Carter Florence (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 106. He is writing about a different story, but over and over the Bible describes this mismatch of needs and apparent resources.

<sup>2</sup> On display in an exhibit at Central, *Sacred Stories: The Visual Narratives of John August Swanson*, and <http://www.johnaugustswanson.com/default.cfm/PID=1.2.15>

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<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992) 304.

<sup>4</sup> Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) 206.

<sup>5</sup> Crossan states, "That intersection of magic and meal, miracle and table is pointed directly and deliberately at the intersection of patronage and clientage, honor and shame, the very heart of ancient Mediterranean Society." 206.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Farb and George Armelagos, Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 4, 211 referred to in John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, p. 68.