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The National Presbyterian Church

Andrew: The Power of Friendship

John 6:1-15

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Hebrews chapter 12, at verse 1: The image here is of a Roman stadium and in this stadium there are great clouds of people, great clouds of witnesses, watching the games being played. And you and I are playing the games. We are in the race. And we are surrounded by friends: saints in Heaven, saints on Earth who are cheering us on . . .and so the author writes:

"Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Let us pray. *Holy God we come before You thirsty and hungry for a word from you that will feed our souls and quench our thirst from the word that has been proclaimed in Holy Scripture, from the word that is proclaimed from this pulpit speak to us a word that will touch our lives, feed our souls, quench our thirst that this day we might find ourselves growing in faith and grace. For the sake of Jesus Christ Your Son, our Lord and Savior we pray. Amen.*

In our sermons through the fall we have been looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it in the gospel according to Saint John, one of four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that we have in the pages of Holy Scripture. Each of these accounts is like a portrait by a different artist painting a picture of Jesus for us: the same character is in each portrait and yet it each portrait is different. No one portrait can encapsulate who Jesus is, the greatness of his character, so God gives to us these four different ways of viewing Jesus, seeing Jesus. And so John, as he tells his story of Jesus has his own emphasis, his own choices, his own selections of the stories of Jesus that he wishes to share.

He says to his readers at the end of the gospel (21:25, 20:31): if I were to look at all the stories of Jesus *there would be far too many to include in any book!* But I have chosen these ones *that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and that in believing you might find life in His name.* And in these stories that he chooses deliberately, he focuses on people whose lives intersect with

Jesus' life – on people whose lives intersect and interact with Jesus' life, and are changed by that intersection. By somehow crossing paths with Jesus their lives are impacted, influenced and changed. And there are a whole variety of these people.

- We've seen Jesus interact with a wild prophet of a man by the name of John the Baptist.
- We've seen Jesus interact with four country boys who become life-long followers of Jesus: Andrew and Peter and Phillip and Nathaniel.
- We have seen Jesus interact with His mother as an adult son with His mother at a wedding in a place called Cana. This is no longer the Christmas story this is no longer the story of Jesus at the crucifixion with his mother standing nearby. But this is a truly down to earth meeting with his mother at a wedding where the wine runs out. And Jesus' mother says to Jesus help this poor couple out. Their party is going to be spoiled and Jesus says to his mother, mother back off a little bit. Give me space. It's a very human story. And then Jesus goes into action and he takes water – he turns it into wine in such abundance that the message of the story is not only that Jesus wants to come to us in our moment of need when we're going to be embarrassed he cares about that. But he can take our water and turn it into wine, give us life that will last forever and ever. And this is what he wants for us too: that we experience life in all its abundance.
- He introduces us to a well educated figure, a leader of the people, a man by the name of Nicodemus in the city of Jerusalem who, like many well educated people, is afraid of his colleagues, what they think of him; he lives for the opinions of others – and the opinion of others, if he expresses too much interest in Jesus, will be one of scorn. And so when he comes to Jesus, meets with Jesus, he does so at night so nobody else will know. And in that night which is also his spiritual night, Jesus begins to shine his light, which begins to change his life . . . though not all at once, but over the long haul, until we see Nicodemus again, now at the end of John's story, being one of those who comes to the cross of Jesus when everybody else has fled away and, and he is there with a man called Joseph to take Jesus' body down from the cross and place him in a tomb – no longer afraid of what others think but wholeheartedly devoted to Jesus in his life, and now, even in his death. So we see Jesus with Nicodemus . . . and
- We see Jesus with a woman who is quite different from Nicodemus. We meet her in a place called Samaria, which is now in what we call the West Bank. She is not a success, she is not popular, she is not powerful. Her life is a mess. We don't know whether it's her fault or the fault of others. But others have condemned her for that, and alienated her because of that. And she speaks to Jesus and he speaks to her and what she realizes is that he knows everything about her life . . . but does not condemn her. And the absence of condemnation is almost deafening. And she finds that her life is changed by this, this person who knows her but doesn't condemn her. She

rushes back to people from whom she's been alienated and says *"Come and meet a man who has told me everything that I have ever done"* (4:29) . . . (and we might add what is unspoken is) . . . *"without condemning me once."* And her life and the lives of all these others are changed by this interaction.

- As is the life of a man who we meet in Chapter 5 in John's gospel who has been paralyzed for 38 long years. The story leads us to think about the whole mystery of divine healing. Why are some people healed and others not healed? Physically at least. Why is this the case? And what's going on with God's timing? That's the main issue in that story in John Chapter 5: God's timing. For so many people, it seems such a long time between the time when they last felt God at work in their lives and now, when it may well seem as if God is far away.

Thirty eight years this man is paralyzed, . . . as if God has forgotten him; as if time has flowed by and he's long out of God's mind. And then Jesus comes and he speaks to the man as if to say, "Have you lost hope or do you still have it? Do you still want to get well?" And the man has an inkling of hope and Jesus picks up on that and heals him. So the point of the story is not so much whether he will heal us all (if he doesn't do it now, he will do it later in heaven), but wherever we are in our life, do we still have hope? . . . do we think that we've reached the point that nothing can ever change ("it's been thirty-eight long years!")? Or do we believe (what I hope we all believe), that our best years are still to come? That when we lay our lives before the presence of Jesus, no matter how long it's been since we've felt His presence, he wants to come to us and say 'do you, at your point of need, want to be well? If you do, then let me help you out. Let me help you out.'

All of these people are different and John wants us to find our lives somewhere within their lives just as he wants us to find our life somewhere within the story that we read today – this enormous miracle, the feeding of the crowd of 5,000 people beside the Sea of Galilee.

If you remember the reading: it's been a long day for Jesus. He and his disciples are actually looking for a place to escape from the crowds that have been incessantly following Jesus. People wanting to be healed left right and center and they need a respite, they need a rest. So they get in a boat and they cross the Sea of Galilee and they go to the northern shore but the people, the crowd, see Jesus in this boat and they rush around the shore and when Jesus gets to the other side they are there as well. Jesus does not push them off but he teaches them all day long. And at the end of the day they are all tired and they are all hungry and there is no McDonald's in sight! But they need food and there's hardly any food to be found except for five loaves and two fish, which Jesus takes and prays over. And as He prays over these and he breaks the loaves and distributes them to the crowd, somehow the food keeps on coming. Somehow the crowd is fed, and everyone eats their fill and they are satisfied.

And you can almost hear them talking to each other at that point coming to the realization that something has happened. After all, to begin with they just received a piece of bread and it doesn't seem miraculous at all. But then they realize that *everybody else, too*, has received bread and something amazing has happened, right before their eyes; something absolutely stunning that they could never forget.

And afterwards you might imagine all the reports that go out. This after all is the most public of Jesus' miracles. Some of the others take place (like the story of the wedding, with the water being changed into wine) in a small place. But this is public. There are thousands of people. There are in fact 5,000 people there. *It is only one of two miracles, which are in all four gospels: this and the Jesus' resurrection.* This is the most public of Jesus' miracles, and the stories must have flowed from this day and been retold again and again. Perhaps like this:

Remember that day? It was almost Passover (as John reminds us, 6:4) and we were thinking about the Passover feast, the celebration of our redemption from slavery in Egypt more than a thousand years earlier, under the leadership of Moses. It was then that our people became "a people." Before that they were just a rabble, just slaves, but God led them out of slavery, led them across the Red Sea, showed his power over the Sea, led them into the desert where, if you remember, the people began to murmur because they had no food, and where God provided for them. All their journey long the food they needed, the water they needed, was provided: manna from Heaven (Exodus 16)! All provided for them so that they arrived safely, in the end, at their destination – the Promised Land.

And you can hear people reflecting on this and saying

You know, it was just like that with Jesus and us. We were in this barren place. We were out in the middle of nowhere and we were hungry. And we felt as if we were on that ancient journey with God. And then this bread comes all the way up the mountainside to where we are. It's not manna coming down from Heaven but it's flowing up from Jesus who takes this bread and breaks it and there's enough for us all. In fact they collected 12 baskets of crumbs, just like the number of the 12 tribes of Israel . . . as if there was not only enough for us who were there, but for every member of the family of God. What a day that was.

And you can think of those people telling that story again and again until it was written down in all four of our gospels. And telling it not just from the point of view of the crowd there that day but telling it from the point of view of the disciples there that day. They would have told and re-told the story as well, and their perspective would have been slightly different.

They would have remembered the bread, the loaves, the crowd, the people being hungry, being satisfied and all of that. But they would have also remembered that this was an occasion in which Jesus *called them* to share in

His ministry. So when the crowds are hungry Jesus doesn't just say "Mm, I wonder what I'm going to do?" No! Jesus says to them, "What are we going to do?"

And in John's gospel it's Phillip who answers (I presume on behalf of all the disciples) by saying "Actually, we're going to do nothing. There's nothing that we can do. Even half a year's wages wouldn't be enough to buy food for these people. There is not a stitch we can do. Why are you even asking us?"

And it's at that moment that Andrew turns up on the scene and he brings this little boy with five loaves and two fishes, and he brings his apologies, too, as if to say, "You know, it's not very much, is it? Probably won't help Jesus. But here it is. And what they all realize at that moment is that *what Andrew offers is quite sufficient for Jesus to take and use for His glory and for the blessing of multitudes of people*, quite sufficient for Jesus to feed that huge crowd of 5,000.

Five loaves, two fish and Jesus feeds the crowd! Except it's not just five loaves and two fish is it? It's actually five loaves, two fish, and one friendship! That's what does it. Five loaves, two fish, and one friendship. Without that friendship there would have been no loaves and fish. Without that friendship between Andrew and this little boy, no loaves and fish, and perhaps no miracle.

Perhaps the scene with Andrew and the boy went something like this.

Jesus' disciples are told by Jesus to help out. Go find some food. They work the crowd; there is nothing there. But this little boy puts his hand up in the air and says "I've got some loaves, I've got some fish. I'd like to share them." And they all laugh. They all say that won't make a dent in this. They all laugh except for Andrew, who says

"Come on over here. What is it you have? Got these loaves, got these fish? Hey do you want to meet Jesus? I know him, he's my friend. Do you want to come with me all the way to the front? Come on down."

Holds his hand, leads him forward, takes him to Jesus while all the others stand back and say that this little offering won't make any difference at all. And they discover that it does. It makes all the difference in the world. A simple act of friendship; Jesus taking that friendship, the loaves and the fish and doing his work. And it makes an impact, an impression as the disciples share that story again and again in the days to come.

Five loaves, two fish, one friendship.

In a 2009 article in the *New York Times* by Tara Parker-Pope called "What Are Friends For? A Longer Life", she argues¹ that the power of friendship, simple friendship, is grossly undervalued in our society today and that recent studies prove her point. They show a clear correlation, for example, between friendship

and health, friendship and recovery from difficult circumstances. From issues of weight gain, weight loss, to heart attacks, to surviving breast cancer, to our living longer in general. All kinds of studies in the last five to ten years show that there is a difference between those who have friends and those who do not. The study that I like best though is not so much about the relationship between friendship and health but between friendship and fear (or, the diminishing of fear). This is how Tara Parker Pope puts it. She writes:

(In 2008), researchers at the University of Virginia studied 34 students, taking them to the base of a steep hill and fitting them with a weighted back pack. They were then asked to estimate the steepness of the hill. [DR: And I suppose the assumption was that with this heavy backpack on you're about to go down this hill, with the question in your mind as to how steep does it look to you at this existential moment?] Some participants stood next to their friends during this exercise while others were alone. What they discovered was this: *that the students who stood with friends gave lower estimates of the steepness of the hill. And the longer the friends had known each other the less steep the hill appeared.* The conclusion [DR: it seems to be very simple and obvious, but it's also, I think, very profound and important] was that when you're with your friends and especially when you're with good friends life appears to be less fearful and less dangerous than when you're alone.

Which means that when you're with your friends...

- you are far more likely to step out into the unknown.
- You are far more likely to step out of the crowd when you feel a little bit embarrassed and feel as if you have nothing to offer . . . like the little boy with Andrew.
- You're far more likely to make what may seem to you to be a trivial offering, of loaves and fish or whatever it may be, in the service of God . . . if you believe that you have friends around you who are with you and backing you up,

And it's when we do that that we find out the wonderful good news: that God will take our loaves and our fish and use them not only to bless us but to bless many.

When I first began to preach some 40 years ago I was scared out of my mind. I couldn't stand up in front of people. It just would cause me just this enormous panic. But one reason I was able to persevere was that I knew I was surrounded by friends. They weren't always there with me in person but they were there with me in prayer. And there were times in which those prayers were palpable – I could almost touch them. Almost felt as if I could touch them. This was a long time ago and most of those friends were older than me at that time – these ones who encouraged me in the ministry. And many of them have died. But I believe, along with the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews that they are still, in a

sense, very much alive, and that in Heaven this image that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives us, is true, profoundly true.

That is, today, yes, today, as we worship God we are in the stadium, earth is the stadium, all of us seeking to run the race that God has given us in Jesus Christ. And they are around us, cheering us on, saying 'run Christ's race to the fullest, as much as you can. We are with you behind you, around you. Do it because you are not alone.'

That sense of not being alone, of being with friends whether physically present or in prayer has been a powerful influence in my life and I know in the lives of others.

I suspect that for every one of us here today we can think of a friend who came to us like Andrew coming to that little boy, and who changed our lives, enabling us to say 'yes' when we would otherwise have said 'no'; enabled us to emerge and use our lives openly for God when we would rather have remained in our shell – a parent, a teacher, a preacher, a camp counselor, a colleague, a buddy – a friend who empowered us. Today is the day to give thanks to God for those friends whom God has brought into our lives and who in one way or another have enriched and empowered our lives. But it's also the day which I think we should also remember those whom God is calling us to, so that we 'can be Andrew' to them; so that we can be a friend to those who feel as if they are alone and their lives don't add up to much and that all they have are five loaves and two fish and nobody wants it. Who is that person for you? Who is that person for you, whose life you need to touch? Not in any massively powerful way, but just to touch like Andrew touched the life of the boy with loaves and fish. And who knows what will happen next if we just do what Andrew did?

Five loaves, two fish, one friendship: thousands fed – physically that day and since that day millions fed spiritually.

One little boy, one friend, five loaves, two fish, you, me, our friend Jesus . . . who knows what will happen next.

Let us bow before him in prayer.

Holy God we come before You. We thank you that while You are a great God, the great creator of the ends of the Earth You care for the details of life and for our lives. You know us by name, love us and want to use us in ways beyond our imagination. Help us not to be so daunted at the task that we do nothing. But help us to do what we can, to be a friend, to bring what we have to You so that You can perform the miracle that we cannot perform. In Christ's name, Amen.

1 Parker-Pope, Tara, "What Are Friends For? A Longer Life", *New York Times*, April 20, 2009.

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