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The National Presbyterian Church

A Hungry Crowd: Hungry for What?

John 6:1-29

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Let us pray: Holy God, we've come before you like that great crowd of 5,000 on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: hungry, knowing that we do not have the power to feed ourselves, to feed our bodies and our souls – but you do. So break the bread of your word to us that through the fallible words now spoken we may be fed and nourished by you, and grow up into Jesus Christ as individuals and as your church, which is your body. Hear this, our prayer. It is through Christ alone we pray, Amen.

In our sermons through the fall we have been looking and are still looking at the story of our Lord Jesus Christ 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 scripture. We have four accounts because each of the accounts is like a portrait of Jesus. Some people say well they're different; they don't always jive with each other. And I would say quite right! They are like paintings by different artists giving us a different perspective on Jesus so that we can see Jesus from different angles – a figure that no one portrait can capture.

And John's gospel in particular takes a specific angle. Especially in the opening chapters, John introduces us to people who met Jesus, whose lives intersected with Jesus' life, and their lives were changed by this intersection. Some were encouraged, some were challenged, some were comforted, all were changed. We meet these characters one after the other – as if John is saying to us "I want you my readers now and in the days to, come hundreds of years later, to find your life somewhere within the lives of those who met Jesus way back then, so that we like them can come to know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and we might find life eternal and abundant in His name.

So we have Jesus meeting all kinds of different people.

- He meets John the Baptist, a wild prophetic figure.

- He meets four blue-collar boys who become his closest friends: Andrew and Peter and Phillip and Nathaniel.
- We find Jesus meeting up again with his mother. We're no longer in the Christmas story scene. We're with Jesus as an adult with his mother at a party, at a wedding party in the second chapter of John's gospel. And the wine runs out and it's a disaster for the family. And Jesus helps the family in their time of need.
- We find Jesus with a successful religious leader in the City of Jerusalem. A man by the name of Nicodemus – not only successful as a religious leader but as a political leader: one of the group of 70 Jewish people under the Roman authorities guiding the land at that time. But he's afraid of the opinions of his friends, so he comes to Jesus by night.
- We find Jesus meeting a woman who is not successful at all. She's sitting by a well in a place called Samaria. And she thinks that life doesn't add up to anything. She's all alone. But Jesus listens to her, speaks to her, does not condemn her. And she suddenly realizes that this conversation is different from every other conversation she's had. And she goes back to her community. And this woman who has not influenced for good anybody that we know of, influences her whole community for good and brings those people to this man Jesus whom she has met.
- We find Jesus meeting a paralyzed man in the City of Jerusalem - paralyzed for 38 years. A person who would say "there is no future for me; I'll never get better. Nothing will ever change." But in that confrontation with Jesus his life changes. Paralyzed though he was, he walks again.

And we find Jesus in the story that I just mentioned a moment or two ago when we come to the sixth chapter of John's gospel.

We find him face-to-face with a crowd of 5,000 people with an overwhelming problem to deal with. He has been with them all day. He has taught them all day. They are hungry. There is no food in sight. And Jesus turns to his disciples and he says to them "what are we going to do to help them? Not just me, what are we going to do to help them? And most of the disciples are *nay-sayers*: "there's nothing we can do. This is a huge crowd. It'll take more than six months wages to feed this crowd. We can do nothing."

But what we heard and saw last week was that one disciple broke away from the others. Andrew, broke away from the others, and went talking to people in the crowd. And he meets up with a little boy who has five loaves and two fish. And in that friendship he brings that boy and his loaves and fish to Jesus saying "I don't know if this will do any good, but why not give it a shot?" There is all the difference in the world from "there's nothing we can do," to "why not give it a

shot with five loaves and two fish and one friendship with a little boy"! And Jesus takes it. And through those loaves, those fish, and that friendship, feeds a crowd of thousands of people, physically, but no doubt also spiritually. Imagine what those who were there that day would say in days to come: "Don't you remember it?" Of all the miracles of Jesus apart from the Resurrection this is the only one that makes it into all four gospels. This is the most public, talked-about miracle of them all: five loaves, two fish and one friendship beside the Sea of Galilee, thousands fed.

The lesson from that day, you would think, would be absolutely clear. . . this:

We need to think about what it is that God can do with us and through us in a hungry world, spiritually and physically? With what we have, not with what we do not have, but with whatever loaves and fishes we have, what is it that God can do through us? If God though Jesus did that then, what is it that can God do through us now? What risks can we take knowing that Jesus can take care of us if He could take care of 5,000? So that we can become givers, hungry to give in a needy world.

That's the lesson. That's what we should carry away. That's what many people would have carried away from this day.

But not everyone. Not everyone carried away that message that day. Our scripture passage (John 6: 16–29) tells us very clearly that there were some people there that day who followed Jesus around the other side of the Sea of Galilee, not so that they could become givers, not hungry to give, but followed him around the Sea of Galilee to the other side so that they could use Jesus to get as much from him as they possibly could. Jesus wasn't fooled for a moment. He says to them, "you didn't see the *sign*, did you? You didn't see the *sign*-ificance?" You haven't come to me for what I want to truly offer to you. Don't hunger for the things that perish, but only for those things that work towards life abundant and eternal."

They wanted to take Jesus (and you can read this in the rest of the story in John 6) and, as it were, put Jesus in their hip pocket and say "Jesus, if you have the power to feed 5,000 people you can take care of me materially the rest of my life. Come with me on my journey."

But Jesus says, in effect,

"I'm not going with anybody on their journey. What I say is that you are the ones who must follow me on my journey! And as you follow me, I will take care of you. In fact, I want to turn you into an Andrew, or into a boy with five loaves and two fish who will take what you have, offer it to me, allow me to break it and through that gift I will use your life to feed spiritually and physically more people than you could ever imagine.

Don't work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which I the son of man will give to you (Jn.6: 27). Trust me. Believe in me. Depend on me. Place your life upon me and all will be well."

This is what we are to learn from the story of the feeding of the 5,000 – to be hungry, hungry to give and not to get.

When I first came to this country which was 40 years ago last month, forty years ago in September, I found myself by the grace of God in a congregation of the most generous givers, people more generous than any others I think I had met certainly to that date and probably since. That year I was spending at Union College in Schenectady, New York, and I joined First Presbyterian Church of Schenectady. First Pres Schenectady was far smaller than our congregation. I don't know the membership. Maybe five or six hundred. But what I discovered very quickly was that they gave fifty percent of their budget away to Mission. Fifty percent went straight out of the church to support missionaries locally and around the world. And those missionaries kept flooding into the church Sunday after Sunday with their stories of what God was doing. I'd never seen anything quite like it. It was not hard to see quickly that they gave generously. But it wasn't until 1994 that I learned something else about that church.

I was sitting in a coffee shop in Lexington, Kentucky, talking to a fellow minister, a minister older than I, who asked me my story: who had impacted my life. I mentioned this church and he said "I know something about that church you probably don't know. I said "well, tell me!" He said "Back in the 1970s First Presbyterian Church Schenectady was the highest per member contributing church in the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. I asked, "How do you know that?" He said "Well my congregation was the *second* highest! We were trying to be the highest but we never could out-give those folks up in Schenectady."

Now, I'm not advocating that we compete in this kind of a way, but it was a funny, and amazing moment. And something in the end which did not surprise me. You see, the gifts kept pouring out of those people. They were hungry to give. And the fruit of their giving was evident in their corporate life, their community life, their effectiveness in Christ's service in all kinds of different places. All of which begs the question as to how they did it? What was it which led to this generosity? This was not a wealthy congregation. What were the principles behind this?

Well they taught me at least six principles that I have carried with me ever since that time. Each principle has a verse of scripture to flesh it out. Principles that will help us not to be like those who follow Jesus around the shore saying

“Jesus, what can you do for me?” . . . principles that will help us to be hungry not to get, but to give!

1. TITHING. The first is the principle of tithing that we heard in our pathway moment. Tithing is giving one tenth of what we have back to God, not because it’s ours to give, but because *all of it* is God’s, and God only asks in a sense for one tenth. Of all of it we are to be faithful stewards, but one tenth should be set aside for his work. And this is not a passing theme in scripture. It is there at the beginning of scripture, it is there at the end of the Old Testament and in the teaching of Jesus, as we shall see. Let me show you this principle first in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in the story of Jacob. Jacob is a rascal, a rogue, a sinner who betrays his father and his brother, runs away from them in fear. He’s running away from God as well, but God, in grace, chases after him and in a dream at night gives to Jacob a profound sense that God will never let him go. Jacob wakes up and this is what he says in Genesis 28 and at Verse 20:

If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.

Gratitude. Not law. Not ought. But gratitude to God our faithful shepherd! Giving back to God from what God has first given to us. The principle of tithing.

2. TRUST. And it’s very much linked to the second principle, the principle of trust. How in the world can I give that generously if I do not trust God? But ‘trust’ is our work, remember?! Our gospel passage says to trust Him, to believe in, to depend upon, to rely upon God made known in Jesus Christ (Jn.6:29). Do you trust him?—that the one who fed the 5,000 can feed us? We can only give if we have that level of trust there. The last book in the Old Testament the book of Malachi (3:10) picks up on these three themes: the theme of tithing, the theme of trust and the theme of the fact that all we have is owned by God.

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say how are we robbing you? In your tithes and offerings. You’re not sharing. You’re cursed with a curse for you are robbing me. The whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house and thus put me to the test says the Lord of Hosts, and see if I will not open the window of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

“Trust me,” says God, “with your life.” Maybe the blessing will be material, maybe spiritual. I don’t know how the blessing will come, but when we give, God gives back and we see the fruit just as I saw it within the life of that congregation.

3. TIMING. The principle of tithing, the principle of trust, then, in the third place, the principle of timing. This is the right time for some of you to hear this message. For others it may not be the right time. You may be at the wrong place

in your life for this message. But I trust you'll still find something within it that is perfectly timed.

In the first church that I served most of those who came were married women who did not come with their husbands. This was an iron ore mining town in the northern part of Canada. It was a rough kind of place to be. Many of those women came to church had no support for church-going at home at all. If I had said to them you need to tithe I'd have broken up their marriages. The timing was wrong. So I never did challenge them in that kind of a way. It was hard enough what they were doing already.

The time's not right for everyone, but for others the time is absolutely right – now! Jesus speaks to the religious leaders in his day and age and he speaks harshly like this: he says (Matthew 23:23)

“woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites for you tithe mint, dill and cumin.[DR: As if to say ‘You’re really picky about this] and have neglected the weightier matters of the Lord: justice, mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Here's an affirmation of tithing. But Jesus adds, it's not the only thing! It may be that practicing justice, mercy, and faith, are your issues to face today. In fact, Jesus leaves us with a great question: today, at this time, where am I to grow? Is it in the area of justice? Or mercy? Or faith? Or maybe today it's tithing?

4. TOTAL RETURN. The principle of timing, the principle of trust, the principle of tithing, and the principle of total return – this is obviously an investment term. What's our total return on our investment? Or to put it this way are we investing only in Earth? Or are we also investing in the Kingdom of God, in Heaven? Do we think of our giving as an investment? Jesus does. He speaks about this in Matthew Chapter 6, verse 20:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

I know that there are hundreds, maybe thousands of people who will meet God face-to-face in Heaven because people in that church God led me to in Schenectady invested spiritually in their lives. And they will see that total return of their investment on earth and in heaven.

5. THE TOP. The principle of total return, the principle of 'the top.' If we give from the bottom, well, there's nothing left over, is there? You only give from the top if you want to be hungry to give. Uncle Sam by the way knows that. Uncle Sam does not say to us, "Listen, hope you have a good month, spend everything you want and if there's anything left over give me that. Wouldn't that be nice? But it doesn't work that way, does it? It's off the top. First things first. Uncle Sam is first – or isn't it God who should be first? First things first? Hungry

givers give to God off the top, before we do anything else. Before we think of what we might do with what we have, give to God!

The apostle Paul speaks of this as he comes to Corinth urging the Christians to share in an offering to help people in poverty in the Holy Land. He says this (1 Corinthians 16:2)

now concerning the collection for the Saints you should follow the direction I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week off the top, each of you is to put something aside and store it up [DR: Be systematic] as you may prosper [DR: in proportion to what God has done for you. We alone know what God has done for us. This is a decision not for me to make but for you to make, in prayer before God.] So that a collection need not be taken when I come.

It may seem to be unspiritual but the most spiritual thing we can do in our households is sit down, look at our resources, and make a decision, a budget, in prayer that we ask God to help us keep to.

6. THE TOMBSTONE. And then the final one is the principle of the tombstone. It may seem like a downer but really this is *the* upper: the principle of the tombstone asks, "What do you want to be remembered for? What do you want on your tombstone?" . . . Here lies a person who was hungry to get? They got it all? Jesus would say, 'Maybe so! They gained the world . . . but they lost their soul.' No!!! I hope that is not on my tombstone or on yours. But, "Here is a person who was hungry to give, through whom many lives were touched. Even through loaves and fish shared . . . like the story of a little boy, side-by-side with Jesus' friend, Andrew, placing what he had in God's hands, who breaks and multiplies for the blessing of many.

This is what I saw in Schenectady. Of all places Schenectady, New York! God led me there. Isaw the joy of a congregation that gave. But not just that. You see, this is important to me because I was one of the many recipient of their gifts.

- They paid my way through seminary.
- They paid every nickel and dime of my fees and of my living expenses.
- They gave me so much money that I was able to buy my whole library as a starting minister. And I was able to return to them \$300 which back in the '70s would be about \$1200 today.

That is how much they poured into me even though they'd only known me for a year. I hope I have given back some of that investment. Nothing has changed my life more profoundly than seeing their lives being offered to God and being used not only in my life but in many.

In 30 years the ministry of the pastor there, a man by the name of Herbert Mekeel of whom very few people have heard, in a period of 30 years, somewhere between 100 and 150 men and women went into full time Christian service, and while they were supporting me, they were also supporting three other seminary students as well

– a church of maybe five to seven hundred people. Generous. Hungry, hungry, desperate to give. That should be the message of the feeding of the 5,000. Our loaves and fish offered to God matter.

Not everybody got it. Some people wanted to take Jesus as a means of gain: “Jesus, you come and join my life. My life is okay and you supply my need.” And Jesus says “No, no, no! It’s the other way round, you come and join my life. Then watch me supply your need. Offer me your loaves and fish and watch (especially when you do it together) how I will feed many people, spiritually and physically, through you! More people, including ourselves, than we could ever begin to imagine.

Let us bow before God in prayer.

Holy God, You are strong and gracious. You are our creator. You made all this stuff on which we depend. You know our needs. Use us to be your hands and feet in this world where we are. Not with what we do not have, but with what we have offered to You, placed in Your hands with thanksgiving. Here this, our cry. Be our helper. It is through Christ we pray, Amen.

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