

Text: John 6:1-21
“God’s Hope for Incarnation”
July 29, 2018
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My family is into food. We often remember trips by the restaurants we ate in. Each year for decades, three generations of us went to Rutgers’ Bay Lake Lodge where the highlight of each day was gathering around the large laden table to “pork out”. More recently, my grandson invited us to see his new house. The invitation started with figuring out who was bringing what food - and only after the menu was decided, did we get the time and address. My family is into food. And the Pearson half of my name only reinforces that! My husband, Daniel, is a gourmet cook and loves to go to the grocery store. Lucky me!

You’d think that with such a focus on food, there would also be a deep sense of abundance. However, one incidence at the Bay Lake table spawned a phrase, often repeated whenever we gather. The words came out of my daughter’s teenage mouth. She was passing a bowl of ketchup to another family member who are eagerly waiting for the contents. As the bowl paused in Sarah’ hand, she spooned a large portion onto her own plate with the words, “There’s not much left!” The possibility of scarcity had entered a reality of abundance.

Like the disciples on the mountain with Jesus, having enough was in doubt. There was not enough money. There was not enough food. There was not enough trust. There was not enough sense of community. There was not enough to go around, or in my daughter’s young mind, enough to go down the family table. “There’s not much left.”

But, food is not the only topic served up by our gospel reading this morning. Fear is on the table too. After more than ample feast on the mountain, the disciples head to the sea as the day ends and darkens. An unexpected storm surprises them. What starts as an easy experience for seasoned fishermen changes into scary and life-threatening. Recently in Thailand, twelve young boys and their soccer coach had a similar experience. Their planned 1-hour exploration of a cave quickly became planning for survival. Rain water rushed into the narrow passage sending them further inside the cave, searching for higher ground. There was only water from the rocks and no food, adding hunger to their deep fear that they would never be found, at least alive. Like the disciples in our gospel story, what should have been ordinary and doable was not the case.

Yet, there is more to the gospel story than food and fear. Jesus is also part of the story. What about this Jesus? Again, gospel story prompts wondering about Jesus. Once again, Jesus is in the middle of each story. Have you noticed how he keeps turning up in church - this Jesus we sometimes wonder about. Today, here is Jesus - in the midst of the crowd and the middle of the sea. Here is Jesus - in the midst of the common human experience of hunger and fear. Here is Jesus and once again, reality changes. The outer and inner reality of the events are transformed.

Many think of these reality transformations as miracles. Many see the change from perceived scarcity to abundance and from terror to trust as all about Jesus. So, this passage from John’s gospel is on the list of Jesus’ miracles. The stories become all about Jesus.

Because he is the Son of God, of course, he can take five barley loaves and two fish and feed thousands with leftovers. Because he is the Son of God, of course, he can walk on the sea to the disciples' tossing boat and cause the boat to "immediately reach the land". Jesus is God's hope for incarnation.

Yet, I have come to know Jesus as God's hope for incarnation in a broader way. Christ did not empty himself and become human in Jesus to elevate Jesus. What God hopes and reveals in Jesus is not just about him. I don't find the deeper truth in the stories of Jesus as all about him, puffing him up. I think when we understand those stories that way, it's really because that's how we see leaders, how we imagine power. But, dig deeper in the gospel and Jesus seems always to be giving his attention and power to others - disciples, bystanders, outcasts. In fact, in today's story Jesus "withdrew" when he realized they wanted to make him king. The Jesus I have come to know is not deeply about his transformation, but about ours.

I believe Jesus' words and actions are to show us how to follow him, not worship him. Jesus knows what he is doing - and it's more than attending to lack of food or a stilling a storm on the sea. Jesus is about transforming how we see and hear, about how we perceive reality, inside and out. Jesus is in the midst of hunger like a sacrament - an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Jesus wants us to trust that God's Love in creation is present - and enough. And then we perceive reality at that depth, what appears as "there's not much left" becomes abundance when shared with all.

When the barley loaves and fish are affordable housing, there is enough. Or when equitable education and health care are shared with all, there is enough. When the streets and schools are safe for all, there is enough. All will be satisfied Jesus tells us with pieces left over. Nothing, no one, is to be lost.

Also, Jesus is in the midst of our fear. When whatever boat we're traveling life in is beset by elements we can't control, didn't expect, appear to drown us or the world in which we live, Jesus leads us to the inner place of God's peace. In the midst of fear, Jesus' voice leads us to trust the abiding core in each of us. The Thai soccer coach urged his team to take such journey. When they complained of hunger, he suggested meditation, a quieting, finding inner peace and acceptance.

I have come to know God's hope for incarnation is bigger than Jesus. Christ did not empty himself and become human in Jesus just to elevate Jesus. It's about all creation's transformation. God's hope for incarnation we know in Jesus is about trusting the abundance of creation and each other as enough when shared. God's hope for incarnation is to transform our fear into the energy of trust and love. Our tossed boats will reach land. God's hope for incarnation is for us to come to know that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience. Amen