

2 Kings 4:42-44

42 A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." 43 But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" 44 He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

Ephesians 3:14-21

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

John 6:1-21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2 A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3 Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5 When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11 Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." 15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs
Sermon Message for July 25, 2021
Pastor Ben Daggett

“Rooted and Grounded in Love”

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus asks the disciple Philip, in the Gospel story we read today, as a way of testing him. “He himself [however] knew what he was going to do.”

What is the plan? Jesus asks Philip. The author, John, tells us it is a test. Test of what? In Mark's account, Jesus is more direct. He simply says to the disciples, “You give them something to eat.” John tells us, “He already knows what he is going to do.”

Please keep the following thoughts in mind as we journey together this morning through the story of the feeding of the 5,000: 1st: Jesus asks the disciple a very practical question, to test him, all while knowing exactly what he is going to do. 2nd: in Mark's telling of this same story, Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” We'll end our time today with Paul's prayer from the book of Ephesians, hopefully tying it all together and inviting us to hear God's challenge for us today, as followers of Jesus. Can I get an amen?

In our story today, Jesus and the disciples encounter a situation with a great crowd of people. 5,000 men, not counting women and children, so we might imagine roughly 12,000 people gathered to hear Jesus teach, to reach out to him for healing and grace. In Mark's account of this same event, we learn that Jesus sees the crowd gathering around him and has compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. In the arc of the story, Jesus has just learned that his cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded in prison, and he and the disciples have been so pressed by the crowds that they did not even have time to eat. But he has compassion on these strangers who have gathered around him. He begins to teach them. As they move through the day and it starts to get late, the

disciples grow concerned that the people will not have anything to eat, and they are far from any village. And then we have the exchange between Jesus and the disciples we have already looked at, which varies in the details from gospel to gospel. In both John's and Mark's accounts, the authors include the detail that there is grass there, and Mark even mentions that the grass is green. This is a lovely detail that bears mention, since the author is deliberately making reference to Psalm 23, which begins with the words: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Jesus has seen that the people were like sheep without a shepherd, and then, the One who Mark would like us to know is the Good Shepherd prophetically fulfills the very next lines of the Psalm, which are: "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." The crowd is gathered by the waters of Galilee, and they lie down on the green grass at the Shepherd's prompting. They are in a deserted place. Here too, the reference to the place being deserted recalls the story from the Old Testament book of Exodus, Israel's time of wandering in the wilderness after their deliverance from bondage in Egypt, and Yahweh God's provision of manna for the people. Manna is God's sustaining grace while they have no other source of food, when they are utterly dependent on God to carry them through. Jesus here, Mark and John would tell us, is displaying the power of God as God's Messiah. In the miraculous feeding of this crowd, Jesus provides manna as God did for Israel in the desert wanderings.

Do you have the impression that there is a hungry crowd of people in our midst? Maybe your friends, your neighbors, or maybe you yourself feel hungry for a taste of God's love and sustaining grace. Does the mere thought of the *crushing need* "out there" overwhelm you? Are there any folks you can identify in your Facebook feed that you could describe as being like sheep without a shepherd? Are you dismayed and discouraged with the depths of hatred and fear from which some folks seem to be posting their comments? Maybe you see them in the grocery store, or in your workplace, or maybe you know someone who is isolated and distressed, in need of a kind word and a welcoming smile. What do you think about the question that Jesus asks the disciple? "Where are we going to buy bread for everyone to eat?" What if this were a question to test us,

today? What if Jesus is saying to us, today: “You give them something to eat”? How do those questions sit with you? How do they taste in your mouth? What is their ring in your ears? What do they surface in your heart? What comes into your mind? Does the immensity of the need “out there” discourage you from responding at all? Or maybe you are running on all cylinders, chasing around with a lively game of whack-a-mole, but most days it feels like you’re spinning your wheels? Maybe you go to work and mind your own business, do what needs to be done, and take it one day at a time. You wouldn’t be alone in any of these responses. What if Jesus is asking the disciples these questions with a deliberate intent to get up in their grill? To get up in our grill? It’s kind of like Jesus’ command to forgive, to love your enemies, to be perfect as God is perfect. Well, that’s impossible! In your own strength it is, of course! We are all beggars before the Lord. We are to forgive, however, **as we have been forgiven. To love as God has loved us, when we were God’s enemies, and could finally see our own hostility toward our Creator, measured against the expanse of God’s love. It is only in God’s strength that we can be perfected in God’s love, and it is in our weakness that God’s strength is revealed.** This story is about manna in the wilderness. We, like the disciples, like those in the crowd, are in a spiritual desert, we have no other food, no other sustenance to do these things, to feed the sheep without a shepherd, apart from God’s sustaining grace! But God already has in mind what he is going to do!

And this brings us to the book of Ephesians, and Paul’s prayer for the believers. You may recognize part of this prayer from our Benediction each week.

For this reason [Paul writes] I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19

and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Rooted and grounded in love.

Barclay writes “This world is a disintegrated chaos; there is division everywhere, between nation and nation, between man and man, within a man’s inner life.” We all, I might add, are like sheep without a shepherd. “It is God’s design that all the discordant elements should be brought into one in Jesus Christ. But that cannot be done unless the Church carries the message of Christ and of the love of God to every man. It is for that cause that Paul prays. He is praying that the people within the Church may be such that the whole Church will be the body of Christ.”

I would like to share a brief personal story with you. You probably know that my wife Milka and I arrived here in NH after a year of church planting in Southbridge, MA, where we had been commissioned to launch a multi-ethnic ministry. Our vocational background and ministerial preparation have all been centered around interpreting between Spanish, Portuguese, and English, and the growth of a multi-ethnic, multilingual community of faith. We each were medical interpreters before discerning a call into ministry. In Southbridge we worked at building bridges between communities, both as interpreters, and with activities geared toward English as a second language, faith and finances, worship, and small group fellowship. Upon being reappointed to New Hampshire last July, we experienced a number of adaptive challenges, and one of the main ones was the task of discerning how God has called us to serve with you. In other contexts prior to this one, we had a clear sense of what was asked of us and how our gifts uniquely met specific needs, since we had been trained especially in that area. For interpreting: two or three sets of people speak different languages, and do not understand one another. Since we did speak those languages and could understand, we stepped in to help

facilitate conversation and dialogue, interpreting sermons, meetings, bridging communities as we were called. Here in New Hampshire we could discern that there were and are needs, but it has taken some time to wrestle with God, cry out in our weakness to be renewed in God's strength, as God equips us by his grace, to be rooted and grounded in love. This is a slow process....until it's not, and once we have the clarity of God's marching orders it's time to move in trust and hope, because God already knows what he is going to do! And WE are the body of Christ, we are the hands and feet of Jesus, as we root and ground our lives in the abundant and infinite mercy of God's redeeming love!

I have shared with many of you the stirrings of a dream, the beginnings of a hope to engage in a ministry of respite, to create a space within the church for an isolated sub-group within the community: those with forms of Alzheimer's or dementia and their caregivers. This particular need is one that I understand personally, as these debilitating conditions and the challenges of full time care have touched my family as well. Each of my grandparents on my dad's side had forms of Alzheimer's or dementia in their later years, and I have shared some of the stories of my maternal grandmother's final months of life while living with my parents, her joyful anticipation of going home to meet the Lord. What a gift were each of these lives, and what a message of hope they each conveyed in their own way. Far too often our wider culture and society forget our elders and those who provide their care, and they end their days in isolation and dismay. These are the orphans and widows of our communities, or at least one group of them. We have the space, we have the facilities, we have the Holy Spirit to guide our steps in creating an island of fellowship and grace, a sense of community again, that they are taking part in something truly beautiful, the Kingdom of God! Can we give them something to eat?

You may have a thousand questions in your mind right now. I do too. After Jesus asks them how they will feed all those people the disciples come back to him and say that there is one boy with five barley loaves and two fish. What is this small amount for so many people? What is the small contribution we can offer against such great need? I'll ask you: Do we not

have neighboring churches? Are there not members of the wider community who are passionate and gifted and committed to this form of service? Can we not work together in all our diversity and unique gifts and graces, rooted and grounded in our love for Christ, Christ's love in us, to offer what we have before the Lord, and trust in our humble Creator, whose "power [is] at work within us [...] to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine"? "To [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever!" I have taken the steps, with your blessing, to broaden the conversation beyond these four walls, to discern in trust and stretch our faith in the knowledge that God is with us along this path. Maybe it's to learn that this form of ministry already exists nearby - well, how might we learn from them, or work together with them? But maybe it's to continue to move in this direction. It is still very early, but why not go for it, and see where the Spirit takes us?

To do this we must abide. Paul's prayer is that Christ would dwell in us so that we may be rooted and grounded in his love, in God's love which surpasses knowledge, or, as my sister said yesterday, to "Grow our roots so we can grow our wings." The Apostle writes of God's expansive and wondrous love, God's abounding grace to unite all of humanity and all of Creation through the abiding love of Christ. We are the very body of Christ! Here we can discern the miraculous trust that God would have US, you and me, the CHURCH be God's instrument of reconciling love in the world: we are given the strength to forgive our enemies, the power to persevere in trust, the humility to cry out to God in our brokenness before the tasks at hand, to know that our rootedness and groundedness in Christ is our manna in the wilderness, is our sustaining grace (these challenges are so much greater than we are, but they are not too great for our God!) We are to tenaciously lay hold to the covenant of grace, just as God through Jesus Christ our Lord did on our behalf, that we might know that God is *for us*, and not against us! God in Christ has broken the bonds of despair, of fear, of resentment and rage, he has lifted the fog of malaise. You give them something to eat, he says, because he already knows the work he has planned to do through you, can I get an amen, what a God we serve! Hallelujah and amen!

