

Good morning.

GOOD MORNING!

When I first started preaching at St. John's in Bellingham, I began each sermon this way. It was my way of making sure no one was asleep at the **start** of my sermon. Though I can't promise some of you won't be asleep by the **end** of it.

There is so much food in today's reading. Bread and ears of grain in 2 Kings. Bread and fish in the Gospel of John. This reminds me of family gatherings with my mom's side of the family. She is the oldest of eight kids, and her aunts and uncles had large families as well. On holidays, my grandmother's house would be overflowing with people. There were so many of us crammed around the dinner table, around folding tables, in the living room sitting on couches TV trays in front of them, and tucked into corners on folding chairs. Even in the next room on the piano bench. Sometimes it felt like my grandmother's house was one of those Japanese high-speed trains we see on TV where the immaculately dressed conductors are calmly shoving more and more people into the train car. But honestly, because it was my family it's more like one clown shoving more and more clowns into a very tiny car.

But somehow, we all fit into my grandmother's home. On holidays, the kids were marched through the kitchen and plated up before the adults. My mom claims that this is to make sure us kids got food before they ran out. What I really think was going on is they wanted to ensure our safety. That we, being smaller, wouldn't be trampled under the mad rush of uncles and grandparents and aunts and other adults to get their own plates. All those giant clown shoes stepping over one another to get a scoop of mashed potatoes or to snatch the last roll off the plate.

And if we look again to the stories today, we find there is actually very little food at the beginning of these readings. Very little food and so many hungry people to be fed. People of limited means, with few resources, are confronted with an enormous, maybe insurmountable task. Someone isn't going to get a slice of pie. In fact, there is no pie. There is no turkey. There isn't a dish of gravy anywhere on the table.

But what happens in these encounters? The plates are set out on the table and, despite the lack of food, everybody is fed. Everyone goes through the line or takes a dinner roll from the basket and passes it on to the next waiting hand. Everyone is fed. The hungry are fed until they can't eat anymore. In fact, there is so much food that what is gathered up afterwards fills baskets and baskets. In modern terms this means your fridge is overflowing with leftovers, and even the fridge in your garage is filled to overflowing. Even after you send everyone home with something. You order one small cheese pizza for your granddaughter's whole soccer team **and** their families and, after everyone has passed that little box around to take their slice, you end up with ten family-size pizza boxes filled with pepperoni, combo, veggie, and probably even one with a gluten-free crust.

God's abundance is miraculous. And it's not just my mom's inability to cook for less than thirty people at every meal going on here. It's the Holy One's grace. It's the Abundant One's power at work in the world.

But why did God do it? Did God just feel like showing off? Did Jesus or the prophet Elisha want to impress the crowds with some party tricks? Did God feel like people weren't paying attention

to Jesus and that he needed to turn up the volume on the microphone? Did Jesus feel sorry for everyone about missing their dinners and decided to help them out?

No. Jesus was already famous. The gospel tells us crowds followed him because they already knew he healed the sick and performed signs and wonders. Jesus didn't need to perform any more miracles and God didn't need to show off to get people's attention.

But why did God do what he did? Why bother?

Psalms 145 tells us God is faithful in all His words and loving in all his works. In fact, the psalmist wants to be sure we don't just gloss over that and repeats it a second time, saying to God, "You are righteous in all your ways and loving in all your works. You are near to all who call upon you."

God performs a miracle of abundance because Abundance is God's nature. The Loving One shows us that he is Loving to us through signs of his love. God can't help it. God is Abundant. God is Loving. God is the source of inexhaustible Mercy. God can't help being God. The faucet of God's goodness never stops flowing into the cup, and the cup spills over and fills up the sink until the sink overflows and then it starts to flood the whole house. We open the front door to let that good water out and it just keeps going and going until it fills the whole town.

But let's be clear. God is not some get rich scheme. God's wealth isn't a pile of money just waiting to fall into your hands. God's abundance isn't a gospel of prosperity. I don't want you to think that if you get right with God or say the right prayers or meditate on money that God is going to make you wealthy. That isn't how God works. Wealth is not a sign of God's approval. Being super rich is not a sign that you are living a holy life. This is why we have a generator here at Christ Lutheran Church.

One of our own young people, Ava Strissel, was so mad when she heard Joel Olstein wouldn't allow his church to be used to shelter people during a hurricane and massive power outages, leaving people without shelter. He didn't want his really nice church to get dirty. One of your own young people responded by saying, I don't want us to be that church. I want us to be a church that helps people who need help. So, if you look out the windows in the breezeway today, we have a generator for if and when disaster strikes. We will be able to provide shelter to those in need. This church is a place of refuge. And our God is a place of refuge like the psalm says of God this morning, "You are near to all who call upon you." Thank you, Ava, and thank you Christ Lutheran Church community for making the possibility of providing shelter to those in need a reality.

God's abundance is about God's abundance. Not ours. Not mine or yours, but God's. The Merciful One is the source of all mercy, not us. And the key to understanding this is to look at the stories one more time.

Both Elisha and Jesus' disciples didn't have the resources they needed. They didn't have enough food to feed the crowds. Even when they pooled together what they had, it didn't look like enough. They said God, this is impossible. This is hopeless. It's a mess. And this is exactly where God comes in. This is where the Abundant One meets us every time. In our need. In the gaps. When we come up short. Especially when we fail.

When we come together, when we pool what we have for the common good, and we still come up short. This is the exact point at which the Holy One enters into our lives and meets us in our

need. Our hopes and our dreams for doing good may be bigger than our current capacity, our current cash flow, but they are never bigger than God. They are never bigger than what God can do. The gospel of John said Jesus gave thanks and then started distributing the bread.

Jesus acknowledged what he had, five barley loaves and two fish, and a dozen skeptical, exasperated apostles who thought he was crazy. They thought he was going to start a riot, because some of those people in the crowd probably got pretty grumpy when they were hungry, just like I do. And Jesus gives thanks for so little. Jesus is showing us to give thanks for the good we do have. All of our lives, no matter how hard or desperate has some good in it. Most often, we just don't see it.

I am not telling you that when things hit bottom you shouldn't complain. I am not saying that when you don't have enough money to pay the power bill or can't scrape enough money together to feed yourself you should be happy about it. Or that if your spouse has passed and you live most of your life in loneliness that you need to appear cheerful. Or you need to say, "I'm great" and put on a brave front when you get a diagnosis that changes your life forever. I'm not saying that at all. So many of us have gone through hard times and needed help and support. I have been there. You don't know me well yet, but I have been there. Some of us might still be going through hard times right now.

Okay, intern pastor so what **are** you saying? You keep talking and I am about to fall asleep, what are you saying? What I am saying is that when **we** come together, when **we share** what we have with others, and when **we acknowledge** that it often isn't enough, God finds another way. When we name our limits, see our shortcomings, and know we can't possibly get the task done—the Loving On will be there to carry us.

Now you may have heard that God won't give **you** anything **you** can't handle. In our society so focused on individuality, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, and making due I know that this statement makes me feel like it's all up to me by myself. We hear it and we think we have to do it all by ourselves. That somehow God is asking us to go it alone. We hear a voice, maybe of someone who raised us saying, well it's not going to kill you is it? And we are getting it wrong.

What the saying, "God won't give you more than you can bear.", means is that God will never give **us** more than **we** can handle **together**. All of us **together**. With God's help. Christianity—the life of the church—happens between people. Not at home alone. It happens through relationship. Not when we try to do everything by ourselves.

This is what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Ephesians when he says, "May [God] grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power from his Spirit...that you are rooted and grounded in love." Paul wasn't writing to a single person, but the whole church. Everyone together. Rooted together. Grounded together in love.

Paul tells us, "I pray you may have the power to comprehend." And here he doesn't mean comprehend intellectually, because most of you here are probably a lot smarter than I am, but Paul meant to comprehend at our very centers. In the very depths of ourselves so that we absolutely know... "the breadth and length and height and depth...to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

That when we don't know what we are going to do, when we can't see a way out, when we face the hard truths of our lives, Paul is praying that in the depths we find ourselves surrounded,

upheld, and carried by the love of Christ. That the Merciful One is bigger than all our planning. That the Loving One surpasses all of our scheming. That God is for us and with us and greater than all of our failures. This. This is the Abundance of our God. Why does Paul pray this? "So that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." To be filled with God's Abundance. Capital A.

Not with all the money of God. Not with all the material wealth of God. Not with all the worldly respectability or prestige of God. No. And not by ourselves. But all of us filled up. With God's fullness. And from that fullness, that we might **all together** step forward in faith. That with grateful hearts our congregation might step forward with courage. That with trust in the Loving One, We, You, Me, Us all might move in the direction, God seems to be asking us to go. To step away from fear. To step away from control. To step away from our own limited perspective, our aloneness, into the fullness of God together.

This is what we might call kingdom living. This is how we bring about the kingdom of God. Not just here at Christ Lutheran Church, but in our families, and in our communities. We step forward together, with out limited means, with our human brokenness, with our sometimes cranky and ungrateful hearts and step into the kingdom of God. Into that abundance that is waiting for us and for all people, because it has already arrived. It is here now, today, waiting for us to take that first, hesitant step.

Please pray with me.

Bountiful One, as wheat spread across a field is gathered to become one bread, so let us here today be gathered together into your kingdom, that when we come to you with hopeful hearts, more will be accomplished than we could ever ask for or imagine. Amen.