

# A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH B. GARDNER

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The Tenth Sunday after Epiphany (B)



29 July 2018

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2 Samuel 11:1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

Today we step out of our time with Mark and now embark on a rather lengthy time in the gospel of John. John, our fourth gospel, is like an eyewitness account. Remember in the first half John sets up the life of Jesus with an introductory poem and then a significant amount of time on the signs that point to Jesus being the Messiah.

The gospel uses allusions and poetry to tell about Jesus, his miracles and the controversies they created. This gospel is brilliantly designed and has a clear purpose which is stated at the end: this story is written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that by believing you will have life in his name. (John 20:31).

The Jesus John portrays in his gospel is alive and real and can change your life. And, for the next five weeks, we will spend some time in just one chapter - Chapter 6. Chapter 6 is full of significance - particularly with our understanding of the sacraments. And of course, in light of my previous sermon, I encourage you to go home and read all of John's sixth chapter to get a better feel for the upcoming weeks and to see how the lectionary treats this "ordinary" time in which we find ourselves. Because, as Christians, we know that ordinary time is anything but. So, let's begin our dive into this highly complex and symbolic chapter...keeping in mind that this chapter of John's gospel can help us connect more deeply with our worship service, specifically Holy Communion, and, I think, impact our lives outside of church. And, since the lectionary decided it is worth spending 5 weeks on this, it seemed only right to look at it more closely. I'll be honest, I was tempted to skip over this story.

Miracles are tough for me. We all know miracles don't impress a post-Enlightenment world, much less our current post-Christian situation. In fact, they sometimes do the opposite: they push us away doing more to reinforce our doubt than encourage our faith. Is it really necessary to believe Jesus walked on water? Or was born of a virgin? Or turned water into wine? Or fed 5000 people with a couple of fish and some barley loaves brought by a child?

I found a lot of commentaries by revered theologians who explain it all away. But let's NOT explain it away. Let's hold it - knowing it is so very important. First of all it is important because it is the only miracle

story to show up in all four gospels! And, not only that, Matthew, and Mark liked the story so much they told it twice. So, yes, your math is correct. One miracle story is in the four gospels six times! That is like getting an email in ALL CAPS; or something from your boss covered in yellow highlighter and red pen circling it saying, READ ME! So it is important to the gospels - which makes it important to us. But first, a note of caution:

I had coffee this week with my mentor, a priest of more than 40 years, who, when I asked, “Do you have any words of wisdom for me when looking at John’s reading of the Feeding of the 5000” he said, “Gag! If I hear one more time how it is the Eucharist I’m going to throw up.”

Which, if you must know, threw me off course. So I looked into our Old Testament reading<sup>1</sup> about David and his #Metoo moment. David is impressive. In just today’s 15 verses, David breaks 3 of the 10 commandments. And, frankly, given the article in the Washington Post<sup>2</sup> yesterday about how women are taking back their lives in every sector including performance music, David does deserve some attention. But the story of 2 Samuel is, after all, the story of how humble leaders who follow God are blessed and bring grace to those they are honored to lead. Then I looked at the letter to the Ephesians.<sup>3</sup>

In this letter, Paul summarizes the whole gospel story and how it should reshape every part of our life story. Paul’s overall message is that there should be diverse communities unified by devotion to Jesus and to each other. In short, in Jesus there are no barriers that keep us from the love of God. So... Basically, both lessons point us back to John’s message. Now, this is not *just* a miracle story - it is also a parable. Remember, parable means to throw alongside. First century Christians and those of us here today are to look at this alongside our own lives. I can hear the skeptics out there...How, exactly, are we supposed to find something in our lives like the miracle of Jesus feeding hoards of hungry followers? Well, at some point, God is going to ask us - you and me - to believe we can do more than seems possible or feasible or even logical.

I know I’m not the only person in the room who has been pushed and tested and wondered how exactly everything would work out and then, by some miracle, found that by giving myself over to God I survived. I’m not saying it was wonderful. I’m not even saying it was fun. But I am saying I found myself trusting in God - sometimes only after I realized I could no longer rely on myself. At some point, God is going to ask us to trust in Him.

Now, I am not going to spend a lot of time on the reactions of the disciples, but I want you to notice two things in particular:

1. The disciples are great because they are so very, very flawed.
2. It is no wonder the greater church is always a mess.

Honestly, don't you automatically think Church Committee when you hear Philip say, "We don't have enough money." Or when you hear Andrew say, "This is never going to work." Jesus, fortunately, was not a member of a church and he showed us that what God has given us will always be more than enough. "If we let go of our fear and stop holding onto to what's 'ours' so tightly, we absolutely have enough."<sup>4</sup>

And Jesus shows us today, as he does every Sunday, the importance of looking at the world through a lens of grace and abundance instead of fear and scarcity. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and shared it many, many times throughout his ministry. And while we do the same thing at the Eucharist week after week, I think Jesus wants us to do in our lives day after day. Let's take what we have - whatever that might be: a talent, a treasure, our time - and offer it to God. And then give it away, with love and gratitude, so that God can share it.

So that all will have enough. Trust me, I get it. That kind of faith seems like a miracle in itself. For me. For you. But it is that kind of faith that Jesus asks of us. To open our hands and our hearts to God... To allow God to feed us... To accept God's mercy and grace - realizing, of course, that we can neither control it nor take credit for it. Jesus will remind us over and over again of this pattern: take, bless, break, and share.

Ultimately Jesus does this with his life: Jesus lives it for God, breaks it open, and gives it to us. Can we do the same? It will look differently for each one of us. Remember unity doesn't mean uniformity. And, while we can pray for God to change things instead of doing the work ourselves - God put you here, right here, right now. Don't let the voices of fear be a barrier to your miracle. You just might be the miracle the world is looking for. God is speaking directly to us today. In the form of a picnic that happened two thousand years ago... What we learn from this part of John's gospel is that the miracle has already happened: We already have what we need. The question is, will we believe enough, trust enough, to share it?

Amen

<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 11:1-15

<sup>2</sup> *Classical musicians reveal a profession ripe with harassment.* Washington Post; Style Section Saturday, July 28, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Questions of the authorship and audience of Ephesians remain.

<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Jason Cox, St. Columba's



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