

The Big Picnic

John 6:1-21

Crossroads Christian Church

Ephesians 3:14-21

July 26, 2015 Pentecost 9 C

Have you ever noticed that whenever followers of Jesus Christ get together, they like to eat? You'd have to be pretty dense not to notice it around this church! Lunch Bunch met last Tuesday, we have a coffee later this morning, and we have a picnic next Sunday, and we go out to eat every Sunday after church! So eating is a big thing for us, especially eating together. When we share our food, we feel close together. And when we break bread at the Lord's Table, we don't just feel—we know—that the risen Christ is there with us. Sometimes, when we break bread at the Lord's Table, I think about another meal with Jesus. It wasn't around a table. It was the biggest picnic that you could imagine. Let me go into my storyteller mode, and I invite you to hear the story as if someone you know had been there and is telling you about it.

It happened near Capernaum, about the time of the Passover. Folks would soon be making the big pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to celebrate how God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, and how they had survived all those years in the wilderness, eating the Manna that God had provided.

Capernaum's a pretty little place, a fishing village, nestled under the hills on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Simon—Jesus nicknamed him Peter—had grown up there, as did James, John, and Andrew, all hometown boys. Jesus had grown up in Nazareth, not too far away, but whenever Jesus was in Capernaum, he felt like he was at home, there with his closest friends.

Anyway, on that particular day, Jesus walked out of town, heading for the windy, rocky hills, just he and his disciples. But word got around, and soon the whole town seemed to be heading in the same direction. Jesus could see them from well ahead; eventually, he could hear them cry out. "Wait! Wait for us! Help us! Heal me!" Jesus had planned a quiet time for prayer and reflection, but here came everybody—grandparents and grandchildren, parents and children, aunts, uncles, merchants, fisherfolk, farmers, shepherds, weavers, tax collectors, why there was old Ezra and Eli, brothers who hadn't spoken to one another for years, walking side by side to try and catch up with that young carpenter and his group.

The whole crowd sensed that something important was going to happen; something wonderful; something amazing. Everybody was whispering. Could this really be the Messiah, the one to lead us from foreign

rule? Could this be the one who will make Israel a nation again, a light to the nations? Could this be the day it all begins?

In the crowd, a few dropped back as the morning sun rose high in the sky. At first, Jesus acted as if he were trying to out-walk the crowd. But something alongside the roadway would catch his attention. They'd stop. He'd smile, and maybe pick up something—a flower off a little plant—and say something about it. Or he'd ask someone, "How is it with you?" and they'd know that he was speaking from his heart right to theirs, and they would tell him things that they never had put in words before.

Finally—about mid-afternoon, I think it was—he stopped on a sloping hillside. The long, skinny line of people caught up and began moving around him. He sat down upon a rock and motioned for them to sit on a grassy area just below him. He spoke in that way that seemed so ordinary and down-to-earth, and yet so deep and rich. The crowd was hungry for his words, but as time went on, you could tell that they were getting hungry in other ways, as well. Stomachs rumbled. Some folks who had stashed pieces of dried fruit or meat in their bags would sneak a nibble, hoping that nobody else would notice. Others began looking up toward the sun, estimating how long it would take to get back and have a square meal.

Jesus, of course, noticed all this and turned to Philip. Now Philip was a good, hard worker; a practical man, who always took things seriously. It's no fun kidding someone like Philip, because they never realize that you're doing it. "Where should we buy bread for these people to eat dinner, Philip?" Jesus asked, so straight-faced. Well, Philip's mouth fell open. It was a two-hour walk to the nearest bakery. Besides, how could they be expected to afford to feed this crowd? There must be five thousand people here! Poor Philip's mouth was still bobbing up and down when Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, came up, and with him was an eight-year-old boy.

"There's a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish," Andrew said as he introduced the boy to Jesus. It was pretty obvious that this wasn't a wealthy boy. His clothes were old and worn, and his tunic was a few inches too short, and the barley bread he offered were the kind you buy when you can't afford better grain. But that kind of thing never seemed to matter to Jesus. Since the people were beginning to mill around and some were drifting away, Jesus asked the disciples to spread the word. Everyone should sit down in clusters. Now Jesus took those little loaves of bread and lifted them above his head and thanked God for them and prayed that God's blessing would be upon them. After giving thanks for the fish as well, he distributed chunks of food to those closest by. They'd break off a piece and hand it on, and soon food was being shared all over the area. Funniest thing, it wasn't just barley bread and dried fish being passed around—all sorts of

good things were being shared. Old Ezra held out a piece of smoked fish to Eli, and Eli received it, and the two old enemies wept and hugged one another. People all around were eating, and laughing, and sharing, and singing, and telling stories. It was marvelous! Jesus didn't want to waste anything—there were more hungry people where these folks came from—so he told the disciples to gather up the leftovers, and twelve baskets were filled. It was as if there was enough food for each tribe of the house of Israel, like the Manna that God sent from heaven to Moses.

Suddenly people were beginning to realize. This was more than a picnic in the country. It was a sign from God. This was the prophet that they were waiting for. Maybe it was the king that God had promised, a king like David, who would help them fight off the Roman oppressors. But in the midst of all whispers and glances and nods and murmurs, when the excitement on people's faces was getting kind of scary, and people were saying things like "Let's DEMAND that he be our king," somebody noticed. Jesus wasn't there anymore. They saw him working his way up the trail, high up onto the rockier part of the mountain. Feeding the hungry crowd had been important—but now that they were trying to force him into their own molds, Jesus had better things to do.

I'm back from my storyteller mode to my preacher mode. This is such a rich story. It feeds us to hear it. It helps us to know better who our savior is, and who we are. It helps us remember that Christ blesses all our lives, and is interested in our physical needs as well as our souls. He taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," and he taught us to trust that God has a way of providing. We have lived through some tight times, and more tight times are probably ahead, but we know that God will care; God will provide.

There's more to the story, though, than just about our own needs being met. It's also a story about sharing. Remember how at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread, so he could gain power over others by feeding the hungry? Now we have Jesus giving bread and fish to the crowds—but the fish and bread had first belonged to someone else, to a poor little boy who was willing to share his lunch. When the adults were spinning their wheels, not knowing what to do, along came a boy willing to share. That was all that was needed. The boy didn't think of himself first; he just said, "here it is. Maybe it will help."

It's easy to get discouraged by the size of the problems around us-- hunger, violence and hatred, and to think that our problems are unsolvable. But when we have the spirit of the little boy and just share what we have to make things a little better, we can let God take it from there. If we can be a little more interested in what we can share than in what we can keep, God

will multiply our gifts. That's a mystery of faith that you can see at a church potluck—did you ever know one to run out of food? That's a mystery of faith we see at the food bank. That's a mystery of faith that we will see at the Convoy of Hope as thousands are given food.

Jesus at the big picnic; Jesus at the Last Supper; the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus; Jesus took bread, broke bread, blessed bread, and shared bread. And in so doing, he became bread—for in him we are fed; in him we learn the secret of feeding others. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon