

First Churches UCC, ABC, Northampton, MA
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“Less is More: The Last Supper of the Loaves and Fishes”

2 Kings 4:42-44, John 6:1-21

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.

I am sure most of you have heard the phrase, *less is more*... I have often felt, no, in fact less is *not* more, *more is more*. More summer vegetables, more ice cream, more sunny weather, more love—how can less be more? Less is more is a phrase that is sometimes gently aimed in my direction as a polite way of reminding me not to go on too long—less is more is a preacher’s euphemism for—“long sermons are boring, keep it short...”

But in fact, I have come to believe that this phrase in fact fits aptly the version of the story of the loaves and fishes it told in the gospel of John that Denise read to us, for this story of abundance and miracle-- Jesus feeding a spiritually and physically hungry crowd of 5000 people with five barely loaves and two fish--is about something else too—the mysterious smallness of the kingdom of God, the less-ness of it, and the way it comes to us.

The phrase “less is more” was first found in a poem by Robert Browning. And became associated with 19th century minimalist design, whose axiom was that simplicity and sparseness and lack of clutter made for architectural beauty. As far as the clutter part I guess that would make me for one a maximalist.

Yet paradoxically there is some less is more, in this famous story of plenty—in the loaves and fishes as it is told in the gospel of John. As it happens, the story of the or loaves and fishes is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection itself, that is reported in all four gospels-- Matthew Mark, Luke, and in John.

As you may know, the gospel of John *differs* in several ways
From the other three--the synoptic gospels.
John is more influenced than the others by the Greco Hellenistic culture of
the Roman Empire and draws on Greco-Roman concepts of the divine in
addition to the Jewish tradition
from which its stories come.

And notably, I think, is another difference—

The gospel of John is the only one of the four that contains *no story of the last supper*. This gospel records no of Jesus sitting with his disciples, breaking the bread and saying *this is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me...* before he was arrested and crucified.

What the gospel does provide us is this story, but unlike in the others, in John the feeding of the five thousand takes place, chronologically, around the time of the Passover, as the last supper does in the synoptic gospels. Shortly thereafter, the author of the gospel of John records Jesus as saying, “I am the bread of life. *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty....*

We might wonder than, if the story of the loaves and fishes *is* in effect a sort of last supper in the gospel of John.

It is a meal shared at the Passover time that represents

How the love of God is present when the gifts of life are shared...

This time it is shared on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a crowd...

The crowd is a band of people--there are those sorts among us on the streets, in our families, and in this sanctuary—they are people like you and me who are wondering

Might I too be healed?

Might I too be given wisdom

Freedom from the family issues that plague me

The sickness that weighs on my body?

This is the sort of crowd following Jesus, they have been earnestly seeking, and the disciples begin to feel responsible for their physical, as well as their spiritual needs. This has been a show with no refreshment stand, no intermission, no meals prepared ahead of time.

Rather than sending them away though he has been seeking respite and a rest, Jesus invites them for a picnic.

Jesus responds to the disciples' question of how they will ever feed this huge group by taking the two fish and the five loaves from a boy in the crowd, and multiplying them so there was enough for all. The crowd is then satisfied and when they are finished Jesus says "gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost..."

Maybe this is a metaphor illustrating how when we are filled spiritually we need less to fill us physically, likely this is a lesson about global justice, and the pressing call that in a world where there are people of God *no one, no one* should go hungry...It is a demonstration of the extravagant welcome, the infinite generosity of God in human flesh.

But in the story as it is told in the Gospel of John there are a few details that lead one to believe that this miracle represents something else too, for this feast is made possible by the tiny gesture of one person—not yet a grown man—and his tiny provisions.

It is if Jesus is saying. whatever small gifts you have with you, please offer them up—for we will do miraculous things with them...

The less is more lesson in the story of the loaves and fishes might be that it is the small things given in love, the tiny fragments of carbohydrate and protein caught from the sea and baked in a clay oven, that nourish the world.

This is a last supper.

This is the greatness of God manifested in and through the bodies and the shared experience of one another....this the mandate to re-member a great teacher by living lives of sharing and trust and generosity.

What is believed in and shared is multiplied, so that there are even fragments left to gather...

So when it comes to the bounty of God's love and how we show and manifest it in our own lives, paradoxically, often less is more.

As I reflected in this story I thought of so many times when what I had to offer did not seem like enough—indeed almost not a day goes by when I don't have this experience in one form or another—I thought of a therapeutic writing group I ran for young women living in public housing. At the outset I felt overwhelmed with the frustration that I could not change their relationships with their families, the disruption of their migration, the violence in their community brought on by complex social factors of

oppression and poverty. Yet we met for two hours every week for two years, and amazing, maybe even miraculous things happened,

You all have examples like this from your own lives.
There is so much we are called to do to try to mend this broken but beautiful world it can be overwhelming—even immobilizing.
And we doubt the sometimes small things we have to offer, the feeling that our gifts are not good enough as they are, so the *more* we do, the *more* we give, the better--
But here we often miss the mark
Because we forget to look at the details within
At the two fish and few loaves that might be in our own hands.
Like the food for the journey that boy had on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which he probably planned to take home to his family, which he offered up when this strange man asked him for it.

There is no question that this is the story of a miracle,
but perhaps the miracle is not as much the transformation
of the loaves and the fish
But the transformation of the hearts of the people
Who maybe were inspired by the example of this boy
And all surrendered their own provisions,
Like the story of Stone Soup
Which always seemed to me like a story about Jesus
In the form of a group of wandering strangers.
Who inspired the generosity of a town.

Or maybe Jesus *did* magically multiply the food,
But only because one little boy—maybe because he believed in magic, or maybe because he respected his elders-- was willing to surrender to the absurd idea that two fishes and five loaves
Could feed this huge hungry crowd.
So we too need to surrender to many a notion that seems absurd--
That we can be of use.
Often we doubt our abilities
Because they look to us like five loaves of bread in the face
Of a hungry crowd of five thousand.

And when it comes to our relationships with people
So much rests on knowing what and how much to give.
Even with those with whom we are the closest, *sometimes* paring down our
Instincts, using fewer words, creates more understanding.

When we visit sick people in our congregation and beyond
We have to remind ourselves that often for someone frail and ailing,
an hour is too taxing. But 20 minutes can be like a gift from God.
10 minutes of sustained attention to an enthusiastic child who wants to share
their game with you can make for the shadowy
but warm and glowing memories of a lifetime.

We recognize less is more when we choose one thing we can do in our
homes to combat climate change, one way we can speak to a loved one
across a divide of misunderstanding or anger, one thing we can do each day
to connect more deeply with our spiritual or creative life. One thing to work
away at a challenge we were born with or inherited, for it can only be done
one plodding, strenuous, sometimes repetitive small step at a time.

So perhaps this is a sort of last supper in the gospels of John.. ... At the
coast of Galilee, Jesus took the bread and blessed it and said with his
actions, Share your gifts, in remembrance of this time of healing and hope,
and satisfy the hungers of the world...

Appropriately, a poem by Mary Oliver about the loaves and the fishes is
entitled *Logos*-- which in Greek, the language in which the gospel of John
was written, unlike the other Gospels, which were likely written in
Hebrew—means word. Logos was invoked at the very beginning of the
gospel—in *the beginning as the word*,
And the word was with God, and the word was God....

Mary Oliver says:

*Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
and the felt ferocity of that love
and the felt necessity of that love,
the fish explode into the many.
Imagine him, speaking,*

*and don't worry about what is reality,
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it was all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.*

Friends, do not doubt or discount your own little loaves and fishes.
Do as the little boy did on the shore of the Sea of Galilee
Do not be fearful about what you have in the face of the crowd
But give so you are part of part of the miracle.
Gather up the fragments of what is left over so that nothing of yours may be
lost but given over so that you too may be replenished...
Let your first fruits be your last supper, every day.
Accept and offer up your small gifts to be of use
And see what miracles God will make of them.

Amen