

“Feeding the Five Thousand”

from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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John 6:1-21

Matt Matthews

Some things seem impossible.

A crowd follows Jesus. They are getting hungry. He tells Phillip, *Go buy some bread for them to eat.* Phillip is shocked. *Jesus, it would take a ton of money to buy them enough bread just for each of them to have just one bite.* Andrew joins the conversation. He tells Jesus, *Well, there's a boy here who has five loaves of bread and two fish.* The disciples were surely perplexed. How were they going to feed this giant crowd? Five loaves of bread? Two fish? For five thousand people?

Some things seem impossible. I'll mention two such “modern” impossibilities.

(1) According to USA Today, several academic studies report the United States is more politically divided than it has been since the Civil War. How do we mend this divide?¹

Restoring unity seems impossible.

(2) Helping poor people in this country rise out of poverty is difficult. Many Americans believe, according to the Los Angeles Times,² that anti-poverty programs are “giveaways to the undeserving poor.” According to the U.S. Census reports, 43.1 million Americans lived in poverty in 2016. That number does not include our 554,000 homeless neighbors.³

Ending poverty seems impossible.

And yet . . . and yet. God has a way of making the impossible possible.

The bar-tailed godwit is a bird that summers on the coast of Alaska. Before these birds migrate to Australia and New Zealand, they gorge themselves with food; the swell to the size of soft balls. It was assumed these birds followed the coast of Asia on their journey so that they could rest and eat along the way. Small transmitters that track these birds have proved this is not their path. They do not stop to rest and eat along the way. The birds take flight and head south over the open ocean, flying nine days non-stop. 7,100 miles to New Zealand and Australia.

How can these birds fly continuously for nine-days? Without land marks? Crossing several different wind patterns? How do they navigate to lands so distant?

The bar-tailed godwit is a marvel. Because of the way God created it, *the impossible is possible.*

The God whose eye is upon the sparrow—and the bar-tailed godwit— has his eye upon us. And because of the way God created us and because of the power of God's Spirit over us, in us, and through us, we can do more than at first seems possible.

¹ (p. 8 *Better Angels* from Century Marks, *Christian Century*, July 18, 2018).

² *The Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2018.

³ BBC News. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42248999>

And so . . .

(1) A bipartisan group called “Better Angels” is working to depolarize America simply by hosting low-key, low-pressure conversations between liberals and conservatives. They are building new ways to talk with each other. And it is working. Becoming a more united United States is still a reach, but when you consider the work of “Better Angels” it doesn’t seem impossible.

(2) And pulling people out of poverty is still a monumentally difficult task. But, according to research out of the University of Chicago, our social programs designed to lift people from poverty are actually working. Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, which is commonly known as “welfare”), housing assistance, food stamps (or SNAP), and Social Security are all successful at reducing poverty. Social Security, the most successful program, reduces poverty among the elderly by 75-percent. Eliminating poverty may seem impossible, but reducing it is actually happening with programs that aren’t perfect but that are, to a large degree, objectively successful.⁴

I see God’s Spirit at work in the religious and secular world every day. God’s Spirit inspires curiosity and courage. God’s Spirit engages us, calls us, equips us, feeds us. Everyday. Without fail. Alleluia.

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Speaking of feeding . . . *how did Jesus do it?* How did Jesus feed five thousand hungry people with such meager resources? The Bible says he prayed over those five loaves of barley and two fish and instructed the disciples to pass them around.

Maybe something else happened. Maybe the crowd started to share whatever else they had in their back packs and pockets: their apples, their leftover sandwiches, their trail mix, their bread crusts. This neighbor-to-neighbor sharing started to add up. Generosity begot generosity. Everybody shared something. Maybe a few families took up a collection and raced off to the nearest shop to buy some salami and rye and dried fruit.

This kind of spontaneous generosity and sharing is as much a miracle as anything. Think of what would happen here if we shared like that! *I’m serious: think about that!*

The mechanics of this miracle—of every miracle—are unclear, but the results are clear. When the Spirit gets involved, impossible situations are straightened out. When the Spirit gets involved, wrongs are righted. With Jesus, broken relations are mended. Unjust systems are called out. Far off people—lepers, women, children, the disabled and infirm—are brought blessedly near. And, in the story today from John’s gospel, hungry people are fed. Hungry people are *abundantly* fed.

With God, all things are possible. I’ll bet those disciples thought a lot about this abiding truth after that impromptu, impossible picnic. I bet the disciples ponder this truth the rest of their lives: with God, God’s will *will* be done.

When everyone was full, Jesus told the disciples not to waste the leftovers. Amazingly they filled twelve baskets with leftovers. Alleluia.

May we trust God to take our efforts—however small—and multiply them as he did the loaves and fishes. Might we trust that, because of God’s grace, our meager contributions will add up. Might we be emboldened to share our resources, our energies, and our prayers with the church and with the world. If we do this, if we truly share ourselves, by God’s grace, others will be fed. Others will be fed beyond our wildest of dreams.

⁴ Los Angeles Times (May 7, 2018) as noted in The Christian Century, p. 9, Century Marks, June 6, 2018.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church. In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

John 6:1-21

1After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8One 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?" 10Jesus 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. 11Then 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. 12When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14When 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."

15When 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.

Du pain pour tous

6 Après cela, Jésus passa sur l'autre rive du lac de Galilée (appelé aussi lac de Tibériade). 2 Une foule immense le suivait, attirée par les guérisons miraculeuses dont elle avait été témoin. 3 C'est pourquoi Jésus s'en alla dans la montagne et s'assit là avec ses disciples. 4 La Pâque, la fête des Juifs était proche.

5 Jésus regarda autour de lui et vit une foule nombreuse venir à lui. Alors il demanda à Philippe: Où pourrions-nous acheter assez de pains pour nourrir tout ce monde?

6 Il ne lui posait cette question que pour voir ce qu'il allait répondre car, en réalité, il savait déjà ce qu'il allait faire.

7 – Rien que pour donner à chacun un petit morceau de pain, il faudrait au moins deux cents pièces d'argent[a], lui répondit Philippe.

8 Un autre disciple, André, frère de Simon Pierre, lui dit: 9 Il y a ici un jeune garçon qui a cinq pains d'orge et deux poissons. Mais qu'est-ce que cela pour tant de monde?

10 – Dites-leur à tous de s'asseoir, leur ordonna Jésus.

L'herbe était abondante à cet endroit et la foule s'installa donc par terre. Il y avait là environ cinq mille hommes. 11 Jésus prit alors les pains, remercia Dieu, puis les fit distribuer à ceux qui avaient pris place sur l'herbe. Il leur donna aussi autant de poisson qu'ils en désiraient. 12 Quand ils eurent tous mangé à leur faim, Jésus dit à ses disciples: Ramassez les morceaux qui restent, pour que rien ne soit gaspillé.

13 Ils les ramassèrent donc et remplirent douze paniers avec ce qui restait des cinq pains d'orge qu'on avait mangés. 14 Lorsque tous ces gens-là virent le signe miraculeux de Jésus, ils s'écrièrent: Pas de doute: cet homme est vraiment le Prophète qui devait venir dans le monde.

15 Mais Jésus, sachant qu'ils allaient l'enlever de force pour le proclamer roi, se retira de nouveau, tout seul, dans la montagne.

Notes:

(3) Ageism is alive and well in our country. Older people are often not treated with the respect they deserve. They are not popular in the media. They are often neglected. They are often disregarded.

Winning the battle against ageism seems impossible.

(3) The battle against ageism swayed in the right direction during this year's NCAA Basketball Championships. Sister Jean Dolores-Schmidt, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Blessed Virgin Mary, served as chaplain for Loyola University's men's basketball team. She was beloved by those young men for whom and with whom she prayed daily. They developed a tender, deep relationship. An endearing image of Sister Jean was even made into a bobble-head. She garnered love and respect from fans and players. And her

relationship with her team serves as a role model for our relations with all people, regardless of age. Sister Jean, by the way, is 98-years-old.⁵

⁵ Century Marks, *Christian Century*, p. 9, April 25, 2018.

