

Food For All
By Rev. Sharon Hammill

I was there that day and I couldn't believe it. You see we heard about this one who was going about healing the sick. A large crowd was gathering there by the Sea of Galilee. They wanted to see him, hear him speak, see if he could be the prophet that we had heard was coming. He had his followers, disciples I believe they were called around him. When those with him saw the crowd gathering, they looked a little worried. It was getting dinner time and the disciples. I heard him ask one, I think his name was Phillip, "Where are going to buy bread for these people to eat?" Phillip seemed doubtful that they could afford to buy bread and said "Six months wages would not buy bread for each them to get a little."

One follower, Andrew, saw a boy who had five loaves of barley bread and two fishes..Still in doubt, he told this man Jesus about the boy and his bread. We were told to sit down on that grassy hill that day. We had heard about these miracles of healing and we were there to see what he was about..So Andrew brought this basket, the five barley loaves, and the two dried fishes to Jesus. There he took the bread and gave thanks and distributed and also the fish in like manner. All of the sudden everyone there had bread and fish. We ate until we were stuffed! When we are all full, those men with him gathered up all that was left over and they had twelve baskets. There were so many of us and so little food but there was still food left over. Food for All and then some! Can you imagine? We sure had seen this prophet who had come into the world!

The story of the five loaves and two fishes...how many of you have heard this story before? I can imagine quite a few of you have. I asked my Sunday School class just last year what Bible Story they identified with and Ted said "The story of feeding the 5000." Well imagine that...for those of you who don't know Ted, he is a caterer in our congregation, and yes he has fed as many as 5000 at one time...but not with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. This is story that we have heard since childhood if we were brought up in church. A story that we can say "what a miracle!" or there has to be some explanation as to how that happened. It is a story that appears in all four gospels however to varying degrees—Matthew says there were 4000 and 7 loaves of bread and several small fishes...but the point is that every one of the gospel writers tells this story.

What is this story about? It first becomes a story of doubt by the disciples. Jesus throws out that "test" question "Where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?" Phillip, the mathematician and realist, says "That'll take 6 months wages just for a taste for everyone." Andrew only locates the five loaves and 2 fishes among the crowd. Robert Bryant, a modern theologian says, "The only food he has uncovered in a boy's five barley loaves and two dried fishes—traveling food of the poor. Andrew then ask the critical question, 'What are they among so many?' In other words, how can the tremendous need before hem be met by so small an offering?" (Feasting the Word, 287)

Bryant goes on to say, "Jesus takes the initiative to feed the hungry (v.10-13). The disciples follow his instructions and seat people on the grass. Jesus then takes the offering, blesses it, and distributes it to the crowd (in the Synoptics, the disciples help distribute the food). The text is explicit, however, that Jesus causes everyone's hunger to be satisfied and twelve baskets of leftovers are collected (cf. Exod. 16:14f) indicating the character of this new community where "leftovers"—both food and people are neither insignificant nor abandoned." (287) In other words, Jesus feeds the hungry, whether by miracle or by sharing, and out of this feeding all are satisfied and a new community is formed as believers...and what did they believe? They wanted to make him a "king." They wanted this prophet that had come to him, that they now recognized, to be this promised king...but you notice the last line, he retreated to the mountain to be by himself.

So we know the story...we can debate the miracle...did really happen or did people really have "hidden" food they shared? That is not what the lesson here today is all about. It is about ministry. It is about compassion. It is about seeing a need and meeting that need. It is about a little boy who had

nothing but five loaves and two fishes sharing with others who needed something to eat. There was food for all on the day. It is about celebrating this day of “Souper Bowl of Caring” that is an annual mission project of the youth of this church.

Karen Marie Yust writes, “The story suggests that the focus of ministry is not simply what good people decide is reasonable to undertake in order to meet basic needs. Instead, ministry is about multiplying resources so that what might have been a social handout becomes a revelation of amazing grace.” A few weeks ago, our youth attended the Ski Retreat at Blowing Rock Conference Center. We had a great time and talked about the “The Green Theme” this year, we had a report from one group who was challenged to “Put Something On It” last year when it came to Overcoming Poverty. Mt Hope UCC from right down the road in Whitsett went back and did just that. They decided that there needed to be a drop off for Loaves and Fishes in their communities of Whitsett and Julian. There was someone in their church that built a “drop off window.” They took ½ of their youth room and put shelves on one side of the wall to stock the food, tables for staging and bagging, and a scale for weighing. They opened their satellite office in June 2009. In a six month period, they collected 332 bags of food which equals 7805.55 pounds of food. They have a 24 hour drop off window. They do not distribute any of the food, they bag it and take it to the Loaves and Fishes office in Burlington. This is a story of a group of young people trying to overcome poverty, helping to multiply the resources in a community which sits between Burlington and Greensboro, and producing a very successful ministry. This is great ministry...Food for all!

So I ask you, members and visitors here at Elon Community UCC, what are we doing to provide food for all? Is it enough to bring our gifts of can goods the first Sunday of the month? Is it enough to put a dollar in the soup pot as we leave church today? Is it enough to feed those at the homeless shelter the first Friday of the month? Is it enough to text to give money to Haiti? Do not get me wrong all of these things are important. They are all small things that we can do. I just think there could be more. Just as the excitement of those leaders who shared from Mt Hope about this wonderful ministry that the youth and the church had started. I would love to see our congregation wrap its arms around some ministry either locally or globally. Food for all. What are doing to provide food for all? Souper Bowl of Caring is one step to help with this widespread need of food for our local community. Loss of employment has caused this area’s need to provide for the hungry to increase over the last couple of years. We need to step up to the plate and do our part, both individually and as a church community..

Lastly, in reflecting on this text for today, I cannot leave it with being reminded of this table that we will come to today. For you see in the gospel of John there is not a Eucharistic meal account. Fred Craddock says, “this narrative is John’s theological equivalent of the ‘last supper.’” If you recall in the book of John, Jesus refers to himself as “the bread of life.” At the time this story occurs in John, it is the time of the Passover. He has created a community, a bond, with the sharing of this bread just as he did with the disciples in the “last supper” stories found in the other gospels. So as we come to the table today, not only remember the words of institution as we have heard before, but remember this story. This breaking of bread, this blessing of bread, for those that fed on that hillside that day. There was food for all and there if food for all who come to this table today.

So I challenge you to do what you can to give to this Souper Bowl of Caring. Just look at the words—Souper—which refers not only nourishment but greatness, bowl—a vessel we use to eat out of, and caring—that which Jesus urges us to care for those in need—A GREAT VESSEL of CARING...food for all! Amen

Reference:

Bryant, Robert and Yust, Karen. *Feasting the Word*. Year B, Volume 3. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009.