

Enough... to Eat
World Communion Sunday
John 6:1-15

Today is World Communion Sunday, always the first Sunday in October, a day when we celebrate our unity in the body of Christ with Christians throughout the world. In every corner of the globe, there are people who confess the name of Jesus: in great Cathedrals, and country churches; in small villages and world-class cities; in storefront churches and house-churches. And today we worship together with them, one faith, one Lord, one baptism. I want to thank our Mission and Outreach Commission for leading us to make World Communion deeply meaningful this year by standing in solidarity with Christians in the Middle East.

When we break bread today, we commune with brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted because of their faith, and are fleeing their homes and countries. An article in the *Washington Post* last week was entitled "Christianity in Iraq is Finished," and told the story of how Christians have been persecuted for the last eleven years in Iraq. The Christian population there has decreased from over 1,000,000 to 300,000 and there is an almost universal desire among Christians there to leave the country.¹ Today we're beginning a three week mission offering that will go directly to the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, which is a group of churches founded by Presbyterians in early 1800's, and today comprises 4000 members and 38 churches. That's not very big – a small group of faithful people. In their September newsletter, they tell of the destruction of towns, and the awful suffering of Christians and other minorities and say their main focus right now is to, "get on the ground to stretch hand to the refugees and the displaced to provide for their needs, and help them not lose hope despite hopeless circumstances."² We want to help them, and we're starting this offering. I hope you'll pray about it, and consider giving generously to these brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East.

We are also starting today a new sermon series called "Enough," and the core verse of scripture for this series is Paul's famous word to the Philippians in chapter four. He writes, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Many years ago, I was blessed to know someone that we called, "Darlin'." I used to know her name, but I can't remember it. We never used it - - it was only darling. Darlin' was a prolific card writer, and you could count on receiving a card from Darling now and then for no particular reason except to encourage. Whenever she signed the card, she signed, "Darlin' Philippians 4:13." It was her life verse, the truth she held onto in the ups and downs of life, decade after decade. "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." And Darlin'

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christianity-in-iraq-is-finished/2014/09/19/21feaa7c-3f2f-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html

² http://en.synod-sl.org/?page_id=2527

was one of the most joyful people I have ever known. In this series of sermons, my prayer is that this verse takes root in our souls and works its ways into our lives.

For the first disciples who traveled with Jesus, their experience was an ongoing discovery of this truth – I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. In today's story from John, Jesus seizes an opportunity to help them learn this more deeply than they had before. There was this large crowd following Jesus because they had seen the signs he did in healing the sick. So Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down with his disciples. He saw this large crowd coming toward them, thousands of people, and he decided to introduce a teaching moment for his disciples. So he leans over to Phillip and says, "Where are we going to buy bread for all these people to eat?" I imagine Phillip's mouth dropped open, and he did some quick math, and said, "It would take eight month's pay to buy enough bread just to give everyone a bite." Now these were itinerant disciples, traveling on foot with Jesus. Perhaps they worked here or there – but none of them had a steady job, and nobody was carrying eight month's salary in the back pocket. Phillip was simply pointing out the facts.

Phillip obviously needed help because Andrew, another disciple, jumped to rescue Phillip from this awkward moment. Andrew spoke up and said, "There's a boy here who has a small lunch – five barley loaves and two fish. But what's that for this crowd!" The crowd was 5,000 men – and when you add in women and children, it was perhaps 20,000 people gathering on that hillside. Andrew was only marginally more hopeful than Phillip. You can hardly fault them for it – we would likely have said the same thing; we often do say the same in impossible circumstances. Phillip just comes right out with it: nice idea, but there's no way to do it. Andrew looks at this little boy and says, this is all we've got – and it's not enough. You and I have been in those situations and we've given the same answers. Standing in the doctor's office, and seeing the results: there's nothing we can do, it's impossible. Sitting with the counselor in the moment of realization when you see what the problem is, and look at what you have to work with, and say, "It's not enough." Walking out the door, after years of trying, and saying to yourself, "There's no way to make it work."

What an impossible challenge – to feed 20,000 with nothing but a boy's lunch. Five barley loaves – it was the food of poor people. Wealthy people preferred wheat bread, but poor people ate barley. The lunch of a young boy, a boy who had absolutely no significance in such a large crowd. The last person in that crowd that anyone would expect to have an answer to the problem would be a young boy. And so that is just the person Jesus used to feed the thousands! You see, this moment wasn't about providing lunch; I suppose the people could have gone without lunch – the disciples thought so. This was about Jesus being Jesus, showing them who he is in power and grace. Phillip and Andrew saw an impossible situation; Jesus saw an opportunity to show his glory, and build their faith. It has always been like this with God's people. When God first rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, they complained that there was not enough food – and there was nowhere to get food. It was impossible and they were sure they would die. Then God provided manna in the wilderness, bread from heaven, food for every

day. Where the people saw an impossible situation, God saw an opportunity to show his glory and build their faith.

So Jesus told the disciples to have the people sit down, and he took this small poor lunch and gave thanks over it, and distributed it to the people who were seated. Then he distributed the fish – as much as they wanted. The food kept going and going, row after row, until everyone had eaten. Then John writes, “And when they had had enough, Jesus told the disciples to gather up the leftovers.” When they had had enough – when they were full. We could easily get lost in the mechanics of this miracle: Did everyone takes just a small bite? Maybe others had lunches and they were inspired to share by this boy’s gift? Or maybe it was simply a miracle, and this small lunch really fed all those people? At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter because it’s not about the lunch. It’s about Jesus. When the disciples walked away from that hillside, they didn’t say to themselves, “Boy, we should start a catering service! That was a great lunch.” No they walked away saying, surely this one is sent from God. This is about God’s glory and your faith. Impossible situations, meager resources: these moments like are about what life looks like when Christ is with you and within you. It is a journey from impossibility to contentment, from fear to confidence, from what you can do alone to what Christ can do in you.

How on earth can the Christians of the Middle East hold fast to their faith in the face of death and destruction? How on earth can the Synod of Syria and Lebanon reach out their hand to the refugees on the ground and not lose hope? How can they not be overwhelmed like Phillip and Andrew by the impossibility of their situation? These congregations continue to worship, and when they are relocated they continue to worship there as well; youth groups, and small groups, and retreats, and children’s activities – they continue and they thrive; pastors continue to teach, and the church continues to pray for God’s peace and justice and for God’s intervention to cast out fear and give hope to the hopeless. How is this possible? It is possible because they know the one who gives them strength. The last line of their September newsletter is, “To God be the glory.” God’s glory, and their faith. On this World Communion Sunday, their faith is our faith, and their strength is our strength; their faith is your faith, their strength is your strength. One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.