

“There is Enough”

John 6:1-21

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” John 6:9

What if that had been you that day on the mountainside overlooking the Sea of Galilee at that critical moment when Jesus asks his probing question: “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” What would you have said?

It was Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, to whom Jesus addressed his question. You can kind of tell that Philip was taken aback a bit by it. The text doesn’t say so, but what really happened is that his eyes got big, he stammered a little, looked at Jesus, looked at the crowd, looked back and Jesus, and then, finally, gave his response.

And you get the feeling that he had to tone it down a little for Jesus. Had it been anyone else, had it been Peter or Andrew or especially one of the hot-heads, James or John, his response would have been swift and sure: “What, are you nuts? What have you been drinking? You think you’re going to buy bread for this crowd?”

But it was Jesus who asked the question, so he tried to put it to him a little more gently. Religious types, you know, sometimes leave the impression that they don’t know their way around in the world very well, if you know what I mean. And to be honest, sometimes they don’t! Tend to be dreamers, idealists, unrealistic. You’ve heard the phrase, “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good?” Present company excepted, of course.

So Jesus says to Philip, “Where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?” Just like that. No lead in. Nothing like, “Don’t you think these people look hungry? I was thinking that maybe we ought to do something about that. Do you think it’s feasible?” He doesn’t raise the question of *whether* it should be done at all, but only *how* it is going to be done.

And Philip, in his turn, doesn’t answer the question that Jesus asks. He doesn’t talk about how far it is to the nearest village or anything like that. He answers the question that Jesus didn’t ask, about whether it would even be in the realm of possibility to feed this gathering.

You can see Philip thinking: “How can I put this so that Jesus will understand without at the same time being rude?” He takes a deep breath and launches into it: “Let’s put it this way” he says. “Let’s say that someone worked every day, twelve hours a day, six days a week, and that he did this for a half a year. And let’s say that this poor guy doesn’t touch a penny of it for his own needs or for his family but puts every penny of it into a special fund to feed the multitudes. A half a year’s wages! Do you have any idea how far that would go? Each person here would be lucky to get even a taste.”

Philip’s is the voice of reality. He is the “nothing but the facts” guy. He pulls out the charts and the graphs and lays it on the line. Philip is usually well represented on church boards. That’s not a bad thing. We need the Philips of the world to look reality square in the face. He is not wrong, either. He is absolutely right! The only problem is that he takes his facts one step too far. He is right that it would take a lot of money to buy bread for this multitude. But that is all that he can see. He can’t get past that. His basic message? “It can’t be done!” “Forget about it!”

Church people get into discussions now and then about whether the church is a business or not. Some say yes, it is a business with income and expenses, a budget, a board. It needs to be business-like and be careful how it handles its finances. Others say no, it is not a business. The church operates on a different plane. We get our signals from another realm. There is a little bit of truth in both arguments. A church certainly should be business-like in its dealings, meaning that all of the finances should be carefully accounted for, there should be good records kept, wise decisions made about how the church's resources are used. In these ways the church could be said to be a business.

Where I think that the other side of the argument comes into play is precisely at one point – the bottom line! The bottom line for a business is profit. All decisions are made in relation to the bottom line! Whereas in the church there is a different bottom line! There are times when the smart thing to do financially conflicts with the thing that simply must be done because we are the church of Jesus Christ and we have been called to be faithful. We have a different bottom line!

So Philip explains the facts of life to Jesus. Six months wages wouldn't even do it. And we don't have anything close to that much. We've used up the local mission budget. Our purse for the poor was poured out at the last stop. Nothing left! Can't be done. Forget about it!

But Philip isn't the only one there. One of the other disciples, Andrew, happens to be hanging around in the general vicinity and overhears this conversation between Jesus and Philip. Andrew is the kind of guy who doesn't dismiss anything out of hand. He's sympathetic. He sees this large multitude and he wants to help. Like Philip, Andrew sees the enormity of the task, but he looks around in a desperate effort to find some solution. And he does find something. "There is a boy here (the KJV says "a lad" – I like that, a lad) who has five barely loaves and two fish."

Ah! Now we're getting somewhere! Five barley loaves and two fish! For a crowd estimated at 5,000 or more! One boy's lunch isn't going to get very far. And Andrew knows that as well as anyone, so as soon as he reports with a slight tone of optimism what he has found, this "lad" with his lunch his mamma packed for him, he changes his tone to pessimism and says: "But what are they among so many people?" Andrew's basic conclusion is the same as Philip's: "It can't be done. Forget about it!"

Whatever we may think about miracles, whether we think they never happened or they did but don't today, whatever we think, there is one part of this story that we should be able to relate to, one part that is as relevant as it ever was. It is this dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. There is a need that Jesus alerts his disciples to, and then they discuss the need and how or even whether they will be able to do anything about it. They discuss what they have and what they don't have.

Anyone who has ever served on any church board or committee knows about this kind of conversation. We had one like it just last Monday at our Session meeting. Someone said, "well, here is a project that just can't be put off." And everyone around the table agreed. How are we going to pay for it? A long period of silence as everyone ponders that question. Various suggestions are put forth, and then a decision is made. It happens at Session meetings, Finance meetings, Mission Committee, Property Committee, Worship Committee, Christian Education Committee. It happens regularly.

There are enormous needs and there are limited resources! That is what this story is about in the sixth chapter of John. What are we going to do about the needs around us?

I mentioned to some group the other day that I was at a workshop on stewardship one time with about 50 or 60 other people. The leader of the workshop told us that if all of us were living on welfare but all of us tithed, we would have enough money to start a church with a full time minister.

I did a little checking myself this week. I looked at the U.S. Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines for 2009. For a single person it is just under \$11,000 a year. Doing some very rough calculations and assuming that every member of this church was at that level of income and each member tithed, the level of giving in the church would be almost a third higher than what it is now. I don't say that to make anyone feel guilty, nor do I necessarily promote tithing per se. It is only to say that there are more resources than we think there are.

I asked at the start of this sermon, "what if you or I had been there that day when Jesus asked Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Well, the truth is, we are there, at least in one sense. The hungry multitudes are still with us. They have not gotten smaller over the centuries but have, in fact, multiplied. There are many, many more hungry people in the world today than there were in Jesus' day, many, many more people living in poverty today than then.

In an article in *Scientific American* in May of this year (*Could Food Shortages Bring Down Civilization?*, Lester R. Brown), it was reported that in the world's 70 least developed countries, the numbers are going the wrong way. The population in these countries continues to grow and so do the numbers of the undernourished. Every time you read something like that or hear a news report about grinding poverty, about world hunger, about the homeless, if you tune your ear carefully you can still hear Jesus asking his question: "What are we going to do about that? How are we going to feed these people? Where are we going to get the food?" We are the ones now standing in the place of the disciples, of Philip and Andrew and the others. We are the ones confronted with the question that just never goes away. And we can all understand Philip's response. The need is so utterly overwhelming that it is staggering.

Nick Valvo from Sacred Heart Catholic Church just got back from a trip to Haiti, which is usually described as the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. He went with an organization that tries to address hunger issues. The first night he was there they went to a village where they distributed food to 2500 people who live in huts and make-shift shelters. He said you wouldn't believe the poverty and how these people live. They are trying to help establish tilapia farms so that the people will have a source of food and income.

There is some of Philip in just about all of us. We look at these problems and we say what can we do? Even if we gave all of our earnings for a year, it would be a very small drop in a very large bucket. But then there may be some of Andrew in all of us as well. We look around. There must be something we can do. And I know that there is some of the "lad" in all of us here. This is a giving congregation. We all want to help and we are all willing to give, willing to share a portion of what we have received.

This is an inspiring story. Somehow, the story tells us, everyone got fed that day. A boy shared his lunch and everyone got fed. The resources are there. We just have to find a way to make it happen.