“Summertime Activities: Picnic”

John 6:1-15

June 19, 2016

Going on a picnic is definitely a summertime activity, but going on a picnic may mean a lot of different things to people. For many of us, the classic picnic means going outside on a beautiful sunny day to share a light lunch over a red-checked tablecloth. That lunch may be a romantic lunch for two, with wine, bread, cheese, fruit, and chocolate. We think here of Omar Khayyam’s famous verse, “A book of verse beneath the bough, A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.”¹ That lunch may be a family lunch at the park, with sandwiches, or fried chicken and the fixings, or a cookout with burgers and hot dogs. That lunch may be a simple picnic on the beach on a carefree summer day. Or, that picnic can be dinner on a blanket before an outdoor concert under the stars.

Picnics can also be more elaborate. They can be a meal tailgating before a big sports event. They can be day long barbeques often put on

¹ Omar Khayyam, Rubaiyat.
by southern churches as the big fundraiser for the year. They can be what the southern churches call “dinner on the grounds,” a church wide picnic after church to celebrate homecoming or an anniversary.

And certainly picnics can be less well-planned and more spur of the moment, either out of choice or of necessity. One Biblical equivalent of such a “picnic,” if you will, is in the Biblical text for today which Peter read. The “picnic” was necessary because the crowd following Jesus didn’t seem to have made provisions for a meal that day; it was getting toward mealtime; and they were far away from any place to eat. The people seem to have been so caught up in listening to Jesus, they either lost track of time or they simply had not thought about a meal.

Let’s look at the text for a moment to remind ourselves of what happened. Jesus had been in Jerusalem, and he had been teaching and healing on the Sabbath. Because of this, some Jews had been persecuting him, but others had the opposite reaction: they were drawn to him, they were drawn to his signs, his miracles; they had what John
treats as first-level faith, a faith based on signs. These people followed Jesus as he went to the Sea of Galilee.

When Jesus saw the crowd, he said to Philip, one of his disciples, “Where are we going to buy bread for all these people?” Jesus was looking for faith and trust on Philip’s part, but Philip was a practical sort, and he was worried about having enough. He thought of the massive amount of money that would be needed to buy them even a little bread. Another of Jesus’ disciples, Andrew, was a do-er; he told Jesus he had found a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew seemed ready to take up a collection! But he, too, focused on need and scarcity rather than what might be possible in Jesus.

Jesus told his disciples to make the people sit down on the large grassy area there. Then he took the loaves and gave thanks for them; he gave thanks for what was before them, as little as it appeared to be. After this, he proceeded to distribute the loaves and the fish, and miraculously, there was not only enough food for everyone, there were barley loaves left over. Jesus asked for them to be gathered rather than wasted, and twelve baskets were filled.
The people were amazed. They saw the multiplication of the loaves and fish, and, because of this, they declared that Jesus was the prophet who was to come in the world. They wanted to take Jesus by force and make him king, a political king, a king of earthly power. Given this, Jesus withdrew from the crowd to be by himself. He knew that he was a king, but a king who would show his kingship in his death and resurrection.

Following the Biblical text for today, Jesus tried to bring the crowd to a deeper faith. He spoke not of simple miracles with bread, but of a bread with spiritual meaning. He spoke of himself as the Bread of Heaven, the bread that gave life, and he alluded to what would later become communion. When he did this, even some of the crowd that had been following him turned away from him. They did not understand, and if they did, the saying was too hard. The memories of the miraculous picnic faded. In an expression we often use today that suggest there is nothing easy about the task ahead, life following Jesus did not sound like a picnic anymore!
So what are we as modern day picnic-goers to make of this old picnic story? At its most basic, the story teaches us that Jesus can do miracles, signs, as John calls them in his gospel. They are acts which show the power of God, and acts which point beyond themselves to God. They show Jesus’ intimate relationship with the Father. This miracle in particular is so important that it is the only miracle in all four of the gospels. This shows we better pay attention to it, as a miracle, and for other reasons.

Now some people say this was not literally a miracle, not literally the multiplication of loaves and fish. They say rather that was a kind of miracles of sharing, where everyone shared what food they had and it was enough and more for all. I often think they say this in our time because it is easier for them to believe in the power of human beings to share than it is for them to believe in the power of God to perform miracles! It is ironic, isn’t it, that in Jesus’ time, it was a simple faith to believe in him because of miracles, and now, in modern scientific and cynical times, people believing in miracles is more difficult step of faith.
I understand what happened in this story as a miracle of God, a multiplication of loaves and fish. God made the world, so multiplying food would hardly be a problem, would it? There is also nothing in the text to suggest that people were moved to share the food they had, if they had any. There is everything in the text to say this: that Jesus took what was given to him, gave thanks for it, and it was enough. For example, the text says explicitly that Jesus asks Philip about where the food will come from to test him, for he already knows what he is going to do. Also, it is important to recall from the text that there were leftovers; there was not just enough, there was more than enough! Truly, this is miraculous!

And this is the next point in the text: Jesus knows what he is going to do, not what the people are going to do, and Jesus wants us to have faith and trust in him in this. Further, we are to have that faith and trust in him in easy times and in challenging times. Certainly, this was a challenging time for Jesus’ disciples. Here was this massive crowd, and they were hungry. They did not want a riot.
Even more so, think of the words of Psalm 23, when the challenge before us is not just a hungry crowd, but our enemies. There, the psalmist writes, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Commentator David Brazzeal writes of this, “As a kid, I was taught that if you opened the Bible in the middle you'd probably land on the book of Psalms. And near the middle is everyone's favorite, the 23rd, there is this line: ‘You prepare a table before in the presence of my enemies.’ I don't know how many times I've read or recited this Psalm without pondering what that line actually means, but here is my take on it. When things are a bit tense, when life is not going at its best, when the potential for disaster is just around the corner, when your enemies are all around you - and even staring you down! - that's when God lays out the red-checkered picnic cloth and says, ‘Oooo, this is a nice place. Let's hang out here together for a while...just you and me.’” And when God does that, he wants us to trust him.

A third point in the text is the importance of gratitude for what we do have. Note in the story how Jesus took the loaves and gave

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2 David Brazzeal, Pray Like a Gourmet: Creative Ways to Feed Your Soul.”
thanks. Preacher Craig Barnes\(^3\) writes this, “Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and in front of thousands of hungry people, \textit{he gave thanks}. I believe that is the most important phrase in this whole story. Jesus gave thanks for what he had. Then the miracle could begin. That’s how powerful gratitude is. The thing that distinguishes the disciples of Jesus in the world is not that they have happiness. Many non-Christians are very happy. We hate to admit that, but it is true. Nor are we distinctive by our success. Jesus certainly doesn’t promise that. We aren’t even distinctive by our mission. \textit{There are so many non-Christians who are devoted to doing very good things in the world. The thing that distinguishes those who follow Jesus through life is that they are grateful for what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do.} We pay attention to even the quiet miracles that just keep happening when we place our lives in his hands. And we give thanks.” Barnes continues, “The reason gratitude is distinctive today is because we live in society that knows little of thanksgiving. We have become so preoccupied with the

\(^3\) Craig Barnes, “Compassion Fatigue.”
cherished self-image of being the victim, it is as if we are all vying for the crown of thorns. For too long we have indulged ourselves with complaints about what our parents did to us, what the church did to us, what the government, employer, or accident did to us. None of us think we have enough. After all our hard work, we just have these lousy five loaves and two fish. But in the midst of this large, discontented, hungry crowd persists the image of Jesus holding up so little and giving thanks for what he has.”

A fourth point in the text is the challenge for us to focus on **abundance in God rather than apparent need and scarcity**. This is true for us as individual Christians today and as a church. Of individuals, William Barclay writes, “Jesus needs what we can bring him. It may not be much but he needs it. It may well be that the world is denied miracle after miracle and triumph after triumph because we will not bring to Jesus what we have and what we are. If we would lay ourselves on the altar of his service, there is no saying what he could do with us and through us. We may be sorry and embarrassed that we have
not more to bring, and rightly so; but that is no reason for failing to bring what we have. Little is always much in the hands of Christ.”

Preacher Michael Lindvall says how we made to see this literally, referring back again to Psalm 23, this time to its phrase, “my cup overflows.” He writes, “In the church I served in Ann Arbor before coming to New York, I worked for a few years with an interim campus minister, a woman who had a penchant for jolting visual images. …..

Well, one communion Sunday [she] was to be the preacher. She told me she wanted to try something a little different in the communion service, but needed to clear it with me first. She said that after the sermon, when she went to the table to celebrate communion, when she went to pour the wine from the flagon into the chalice, she wanted to just keep on pouring, keep on pouring until the cup overflowed. Just like the Psalm says….Well, I thought to myself, this is a college town; this is the campus minister; it’s summer - OK. I’m still not sure I made the right call. She did it. The choir, who could really see what was going on, gasped in unison. Everyone in the congregation who noticed was

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4 I am indebted for this quote to Faith Conklin, “More Than Enough.”
jolted by it. A minute later, most everybody got the unspoken point. And let me tell you, nobody forgot it.” He concludes, “There’s usually not enough for all we want, but there’s always more than enough for all we need to be fulfilled. Imbedded in the story of the loaves and fishes is an invitation from Jesus Christ. The invitation is to live your life assuming, trusting, knowing, that there really is enough. Probably not enough for everything you want, but always, always enough of what you need to be fulfilled……There’s enough of everything you and I need to be happy. In fact, there’s enough that your cup will overflow and there’ll be 12 baskets left over.”

Lindvall makes the same point with respect to churches. He notes that the one thing growing churches have in common is that they operate out of a view of plentiful resources. “The churches that [grow] expect… that there [will] always somehow be enough—enough people, enough imagination, enough energy, enough talent, enough money, even. The reigning expectation, the mood of such congregations [is], ‘somehow there will be plenty.’”

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5 Michael Lindvall, “More Than Enough.”
There are other points to the text, a richness to be found in its interpretation that is never ending. I offer just a few for you to think about, as suggested by Biblical commentator Dale Bruner. Why was it important to note the loaves were barley? Barley was the grain used for flour of the poor; this tells us it was not a well to do boy who offered what he had, all he had. Also, some interpreters suggest the five barley loaves are an allegory on the five books of the Old Testament; it was known that barley was a difficult grain to get at the pith of; so the Old Testament can be difficult to interpret without understanding Jesus, yet it still can feed us. In this interpretation, the two fish represent the Psalms and the Prophets.

As we conclude, let us return to where we started, with picnics. Perhaps a final point I might offer on that note is this. Life is wonderful, but it is not always a picnic. Faith is living the abundant life, but it, too, is not always a picnic. But through it all, the good and the bad, the picnics and the well-not-so-much, God is with us in Jesus. He can do

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miracles, and always, always, the bread of heaven is with us. And always, always, there is enough.

Amen.