

**Sermon for Pentecost X—Year B 2018**  
*Present in the Smallest Acts of Compassion and Generosity*

What is the largest group of people  
you have ever had to prepare a meal for?  
When I think back over the many meals I've prepared through the years,  
I think the largest group was around 40.  
That was challenging. But preparing to feed 5,000  
or as the gospel of John puts it “a large crowd” on a mountainside?  
Well, no, I haven't had that experience.  
So, to tell you the truth, I completely understand  
Philip's and Andrew's response to Jesus  
in the face of that large crowd  
of more than 5,000 men, women, and children.  
There was a mountain of hunger standing before them.  
And it's not as though any one of Jesus' close followers  
had with them the resources to begin to touch that unending need.

So yes, I understand Philip,  
even though I have never stood before a crowd  
of so many hungry people.  
As you know, from last week's sermon,  
it was a challenge for me to rustle up food for our team of 8 in Houston  
while attending the Youth Gathering--  
I definitely had a few “Philip” moments during those 5 days!

But, in fact, all it takes to send me down a path  
where hope seems scarce is sometimes just one person . . .  
When that one person is homeless and hungry and begging on the street  
*or* even standing at our church doors.  
Several weeks ago, I had a “Philip” moment right here in the sanctuary  
after worship when a man came in seeking to speak with me.  
My first thought, predictably, was that he wanted a handout.

In a way that was true,  
but his problem was so much more complicated than that.  
He explained to me that he was undocumented  
and that he had lost his job.  
He and his family had fallen behind in the rent.  
They were being evicted.  
They had very little food and soon he and his wife and two daughters  
would have nowhere to live.  
He showed me a handful of legal documents  
and wanted to know if I could help them:  
with advice . . . with financial support.  
To be honest, this was definitely a “Philip” for me.  
How could I possibly be of any help to this man  
and his family in any way?  
Needing inspiration and support myself,  
I decided we needed to pray together.  
As we prayed, it occurred to me that I could get him in touch  
with Lutheran Social Services of NJ who help everyone in need—  
the documented and the undocumented.  
And, of course, we could also give him some food  
to take back with him from our pantry donations.  
The man began to cry as I told him what I could do for them,  
and he thanked me so profusely that I felt embarrassed  
because I felt what I had done was not nearly enough.

Later, when I told a good friend who is an Episcopal priest  
about this experience, she reminded me  
that one of the other things I had given this man was hope—  
She reminded me that in that moment I was representing God.  
I was not just meeting a physical need and a physical hunger,  
but the hunger we all experience to be treated with dignity and kindness.  
And yet, even though I had the means to physically feed him  
and his family that day, I find I still feel an awful lot like Philip  
pointing out the obvious truth to Jesus that it takes a whole lot  
to make a difference to such a mountain of need.

Situations like these always leave me feeling a bit hopeless.  
I fell as though nothing I can offer will ever be enough  
and that even what I have to give can't even begin  
to satisfy the profound needs of people in this world.  
Not even when they show up one at a time.

Yes, I know something of the despair which fed Philip's  
and Andrew's response in the gospel story for today.  
I have a feeling many of you know something of this despair, too.

That's when you and I need to look again to Jesus.  
Because Jesus looked beyond Philip's entirely reasonable response.  
Notice that all Jesus saw was a hungry crowd  
and that in the face of such need  
even reasonable despair was simply *not* an option.  
It just wasn't then and wouldn't be even today.  
So, when Jesus was told that there was a boy there  
with a lunch of bread and fish,  
he took it, gave thanks for it, and began to share it.  
And the rest? Well, we know the rest.  
No one went away hungry that day.

It surely would have made more sense to tell those people  
that they were on their own for their next meal.  
Would it make more sense to lock our doors against all people  
like that undocumented father with his profound, unending need?  
Indeed, just like that man and his family,  
this great crowd on the mountainside  
would be hungry again before they knew it.  
A miraculous meal on a hillside wouldn't change that.  
And that is only speaking about their *physical* hunger.  
We can only imagine the other needs which were multiplied  
by 5,000 and more men, women and children that day.

And yet there is this:

We are not told what became of those 5,000 who feasted on a boy's lunch that day so long ago.

We don't know how many of them left that day with a greater sense of possibility and hope than they had ever had before.

We don't know if in the next meals they shared, whether they experienced a deepened sense of wonder at what can happen in such ordinary moments.

And we don't know whether as they learned to watch for it, they were able to continue to experience the work of God in remarkable ways in, with, and through ordinary means.

*We don't know*, because the story doesn't tell us.

Yet, we *do* know that this story is told in one form or another in all four of the gospels—so it must have been life changing for many (just saying!).

And we *do* know this truth that Jesus met people where they were and gave them what they needed in that moment. This is central to our understanding of who Jesus was and is and, therefore, it is also central to who you and I are called to be as we seek to follow him.

No, it doesn't seem like much:

Five barley loaves and a couple of fish.

A bag of pasta and sauce and a box or two of macaroni and cheese.

Twenty minutes of listening and praying for a stranger's need.

It doesn't seem like much, but in the end, it may be everything.

We may never know.

But the fact that you and I often don't know what comes next, doesn't mean it didn't make a difference.

And just that possibility can turn despair into hope again.

In every telling of this story of the feeding of the thousands,  
Jesus takes the initiative to feed the hungry.  
The disciples follow his instructions and seat the people in the grass.  
In this telling in the gospel of John,  
we know there was a boy's lunch of bread and fish  
that Jesus takes, blesses and gives to the crowd.  
Whether the miracle is a supernatural multiplication of the food  
or the unleashing of compassion and generosity among the people  
is not altogether clear.  
What is clear from the story is that Jesus causes everyone's hunger to be  
satisfied and twelve baskets of leftovers are collected.  
And that makes me think that perhaps this is not an 'either/or' event  
but a "both/and" one.  
The feeding of the five thousands was both a supernatural,  
divine miracle that manifested in unbounded compassion and generosity.  
As the ancient chant proclaims:  
God is present where true love and charity abide.  
Love's knowledge multiples meager resources  
and makes a way forward when knowledge comes to its end.

Holy Trinity is a "small church"  
and I think sometimes we, as a congregation,  
have "Philip" moments when we feel the pressures of being "small."  
And, yet, we act in a variety of ways in service to others  
that are "bigger" than we know.  
As Luther stated, "the finite is capable of bearing the infinite."  
We—the small, weak, and finite are made able to bear the  
grace of God, the mercy and compassion of Christ,  
with and for others.  
Our baptism has claimed and sealed us to be Christ for others.

In the gospel of John, this feeding of the five thousand—  
and Jesus walking on the water afterward—are signs that point to God.

So I wonder, what signs point you to God?  
Many of us might look for the big Cecil B. DeMill type moments—  
grandiose visions of the presence of God.  
Or, perhaps, the signs we envision  
are rare glimpses of the divine nature such as a baby's first cry,  
the dawn breaking at an Easter sunrise service,  
or glorious music, or  
even standing on a mountaintop gazing at the valley below.

The reality of our life on earth, though,  
is that we don't spend much time on mountaintops.  
Most of our days are spent traveling the plain and dusty roads  
of daily routine and responsibility.  
Where are the signs pointing you to a gracious and loving Savior  
when you feel that your life is a wreck or  
you are tired and feeling overwhelmed—by needs of your own  
and the needs of those around you?  
Where in the world can we see the One who sustains us,  
who saves us, who never leaves us—  
not even in the worst and most chaotic train wrecks life can throw at us?

The gospel of John gives us a clue:  
we do well to think *small and simple*.  
Jesus is found in the ordinary and everyday stuff of life.  
The gospel of John points to Jesus in simple signs of bread and water.  
In these verses Jesus uses a few loaves of bread  
and a shortcut across the stormy lake to sustain and calm  
hungry and fearful people.  
Yes, bread and water say a lot about *who Jesus is*  
*and how Jesus is present*—in the sacraments of baptism and communion  
but also in daily life . . .  
and especially in, with, and through you and me.

In our “Philip” moments when faced with overwhelming need  
we may be tempted to look at our small resources and ask,  
“What are they among so many?”  
Yet if we place these great needs before the Lord in prayer,  
Christ will walk over the depth of our fears and  
we may hear him say the words “What do you have?”

Yes, whatever we have is not enough.  
Yet, as this gospel story points out,  
the “not enough” is not the final answer.  
When placed in the hands of Jesus,  
human weakness and limits become more than enough  
and you and I and the world will be fed and blessed.  
Love’s knowledge multiplies meager resources,  
and God is present even in the smallest acts of love and compassion.