

“Going Beyond”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 29, 2012

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Scriptures: John 6: 1-15 Ephesians 3: 14-21

John 6: 1-15

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, **“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”** ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, **“Make the people sit down.”** Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, **“Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.”** ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Ephesians 3: 14-21

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Going Beyond

Jesus was going on a retreat.

It was time to get away, to take a break, to catch his breath.

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee,

also called the Sea of Tiberias.

A large crowd kept following him,

because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.

Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

When Jesus looked up he saw a large crowd coming toward him.

This beloved story is in all four gospels.

Last Sunday we explored the story in Mark,

the version in which the disciples told Jesus to send them away

(you know, *them, other people, all those who are not us*),

to tell them to go away, to go back into the villages to eat.

In John's Gospel, Jesus turned to Philip

-- probably because Philip was from around that way --

and said, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

The scriptures are clear that Jesus saw the need of the people before him,

and he had compassion on them.

Yet he was not above taking a step back to see what his followers would do.

The disciples, however, were at a complete loss of what to do.

We can well imagine them feeling overwhelmed,

thinking that the need was so great

and what they had to spare was so little.

Anyway, what difference would it make?

If they fed one person, everyone would want something.

Clearly, obviously, they did not have enough to meet the demand.

So when Jesus said to Philip,

“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

Philip answered Jesus,

*“Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread
for each of them to get a little.”*

How many of us could meet the need of all the hungry people in our midst?

Good intentions aside, practically speaking

this goes beyond what we could realistically do ourselves. Right?

God does not let the disciples off the hook;

they can’t say, *“I just don’t care.”*

Discipleship is about being a channel for the Holy Spirit

to do something through your gifts and availability for the common good.

What do you think came first for the disciples:

a spirit of generosity or practicing generosity?

Which do you need to come first – the spirituality or the practice –

for you to be generous?

The writer of Ephesians teaches us that through Christ,

*“the power at work within us is able to accomplish
abundantly far more*

than all we can ask or imagine.”

What happened next in the Gospel is nothing short of a miracle.

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Jesus,

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.

But what are they among so many people?”

Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.”

Now there was a great deal of grass in the place;

so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks,

he distributed them to those who were seated;

so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

They were satisfied...they had enough...”

This is a miracle you have witnessed many, many times.

What happens when you are in a group and someone starts to share?

Most often people start to pitch in.

A dollar here, a helping hand there,

a barn raising over yonder,

a painting party with lots of pizza and laughter,

a grand opening of our Chalice Thrift store next Saturday...

And the miracle is that from almost nothing

what is discovered, what is created, what is produced

is enough, is sufficient, is providential.

The Lord does provide;

God's provisions are more than enough for our needs.

My father, the late Rev. George E. Calvert, loved to tell this story.

He received it as a divine metaphor for life in community.

Whether preaching about the feeding of the 5,000

or simply telling the story around a campfire,

George testified his belief that the folks present

had morsels of food in their own bags or purses,

but were most hesitant to share anything

out of a lack of an altruistic spirit

or for fear of being in want.

He could imagine the expressions of people in the crowd

watching as a child donated all he had,

giving five loaves and two fish to Jesus to be blessed and shared.

Regardless of whether the crowd then shared

out of shame, relief or genuine generosity,

George gave thanks that everyone contributed something.

The results were evident:

filled bellies, satisfied souls, and overflowing baskets of leftovers.

The miracle is that the generosity of one person sparks a movement,

thanks to the grace of God.

What do you think,

is God eager and ready to spark another movement?

What role might God have in mind for you?

For us, working and serving together?

Going Beyond

A friend in Los Angeles received a visitor from Pakistan.

The Pakistani was about to enroll in college in California, and it was her first time outside of her village.

When they arrived at our friend's suburban home, she looked at the house and asked, "*Who lives here?*"

"*I do,*" she said.

"*I mean, how many families live here?*"

"*I do,*" our friend said again.

And then the Pakistani pointed at the garage.

"*How many families live in that house?*"

"*No one. It holds my car.*"

The young woman was amazed.

"*If there was a building so big in my village it would have a family in every room.*"

Our friend, a good, God-loving Christian, was really taken aback.

In her mind, in her experience, in her truth it was a humble home, nothing outlandish except the California price tag, a shelter to house her things and memories and future, a safe place to come back to at night for rest and relaxation.

However, seen through the eyes of a neighbor from another land, another culture, her humble home was more than enough for her own

and several families to boot.

The ten-second conversation made her re-evaluate and re-imagine
what she took for granted,
and how she might live more simply
so that other people might simply live.

God does not let us off the hook;

we can't say, "I just don't care."

Discipleship is about being a channel for the Holy Spirit

to do something through your gifts and availability for the common good.

Going Beyond

Let's take a moment to look ahead to tomorrow evening.

You are at home.

As you sit down to dinner there is a knock on the door.

You get up to answer it.

Standing on your welcome mat is a young soul you've never met before.

The child is thin and gaunt. He tells you he's hungry.

What do you say?

You look behind him and see another child,

who presents to you her empty bowl

and asks for something, anything to eat.

What do you do?

Behind them is their mother, whose eyes plead for mercy.

How do you respond?

You glance behind them and see another family;
and then you see the line of hungry people

which extends to the sidewalk and around the corner.

How do you feel?

The line continues, slinking its way across the city and state,
crossing the country, and making its way around the world,

not once, not twice, not three times, but more.

Patricia Sprinkle's book, Hunger,

from which we gain this imagery,

teaches us that the world's line of hungry people

starts at my door and your door

and goes around the world eight times.

What can one person do?

Do you feel overwhelmed?

Ever wonder what difference can one congregation possibly make?

Should we throw in the towel, throw up our hands,

or throw out Biblical mandates to serve the least of these?

Does it really matter whether we pool our resources, energy, and faith
through Decatur Cooperative Ministry

or Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry

or Week of Compassion

or Bread for the World

or United Way

or UNICEF?

Clearly we need to move toward addressing the reality

that a third of the world's population

goes daily without adequate food and water.

At the same time we are called to go beyond

what stymies us even before we begin:

we get stuck because we feel overwhelmed

by the magnitude of the problem.

Sprinkle said,

“When our neighbor’s kid shows up underfed, we reach for another plate.

But how can we translate something as big as world hunger

into personal terms?”

The writer of Ephesians teaches us that through Christ,

“the power at work within us is able to accomplish

abundantly far more

than all we can ask or imagine.”

The Apostle Paul sees that the joy of giving is at the heart of social change.

He inspires us to step up to the challenge,

saying, *“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity,*

which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;

for the rendering of this ministry

not only supplies the needs of the saints

but also overflows

with many thanksgivings to God.”

(2 Corinthians 6: 11-12)

God will not let us off the hook.

Feeling stymied or overwhelmed is no excuse!

We can't turn our backs and say, *“I don't care.”*

Together, united in ministry and hope,

sustained and guided by the grace of God,

we can end world hunger.

It starts right here,

in this sacred space and safe place,

right now, with us, thanks to the grace of God.

The Prophet Isaiah spoke of God's passion

for helping the forlorn and desolate and lost.

To do so God was willing and able

to “turn all my mountains into a road

and my highways shall be raised up.” (Isaiah 49: 11)

And who does the Lord expect to go beyond obstacles, real or imagined,

to tear down barriers to justice

and create pathways of mercy?

That's right, my friends: us.

Give sacrificially, knowing that we accepted Jesus Christ's commission

to serve God in the community

the moment the baptismal waters first touched our skin

and the call to love first entered into our consciousness.

Give joyfully, knowing that our offerings grade roads, dig wells,

show lost souls the way home,

stock pantry shelves,

and feed hungry families wherever there is need.

Give hopefully, trusting that your gift of love makes its way around the world,

not once, not twice, not three times, but more,

and "overflows with many thanksgivings to God."

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Prayer

Gracious and Loving God, forgive us when our practicality gets in the way of faithful living. Sometimes our sense and sensibility prevents us from being open to your amazing grace, which continually unfolds before our disbelieving eyes. Be patient with us – but maybe not too patient! – while we learn how to trust in your providential care. May we pass the test and accept that your grace is sufficient.

Yes, Lord, you do provide. You provide opportunities for service, for healing, and for witnessing the signs and wonders that happen every day in our midst. Right now you are providing the gift of forgiveness. Our confessed sins have been heard and absolved. We are cleansed and commissioned to go forth as a new person in Christ.

Call to Communion

When Moses asked God whom he should tell the Israelites was sending him to rescue them from slavery, God said, "I am who I am!" Fast forward to the night when Jesus' disciples got into a boat, and "started across the sea to Capernaum. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'" (John 6: 17-20) Another translation of "It is I" is "I am!"

Throughout John's Gospel Jesus announces his identity. "I am the Bread of Life." "I am the Light of the world." "I am the Good Shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

How far back did Jesus envision his part in the salvation of humanity? Jesus said, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"

As we gather around the Lord's Table, we remember the salvific power of God throughout history. We give thanks that the great "I am!" is still saving lives today, including our own.