

What's in your hand

John 6:1-14 (October 16, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Are there days when you feel overwhelmed? Overwhelmed by the things you have to do? By the challenges you face? By problems that need to be solved? All these things like a giant wave washing over you?

Overwhelmed by the great enormity of the tasks at hand, and the meagre resources you have to address them.

It's not uncommon for me to feel that way, and I'm guessing maybe you as well. It's good to know we're not alone. The scripture reading suggested for this International Witness Sunday tells the story of a miraculous feeding. But it begins with what seems like an insurmountable challenge.



Jesus and his disciples were followed by a large crowd of people who were eager to hear his message. The disciples saw them coming – more than 5,000 people! Jesus asks the disciples a question: “Where are we going to buy enough bread to feed these people?” I can just imagine the look on the disciples’ faces. Like deer caught in the headlights. Eyes wide, mouths open, jaws dropped.



“What? You want us to feed them? How are we going to do a thing like that?” Philip got out his pocket calculator. “Two hundred denarii,” he declared, after punching in the numbers. “Six months wages. “And that’s for the bare minimum: A few bread sticks and a glass of water – if we’re lucky. Hardly enough to satisfy.”

The disciples whispered among themselves. Until finally another one, Andrew, came forward, holding the hand of a young lad and smiling sheepishly. “Well, we do have this,” he mumbled. “Five barley loaves, and two fish.” Those fish looked more like sardines than giant tuna. And as soon Andrew said it, he admitted the hopelessness of the situation. “But what are they among so many people?”

So many mouths to feed. So few resources. How many times have we felt that same sense of futility: Knowing the needs of the world and feeling powerless to make any difference.

The crowd in this 16th century painting seems remarkably placid to me. They're not hungry like I get hungry. Though I can imagine those women with children might have grown impatient.

And look at the little boy in the middle. Poor fellow. He's about to give away his lunch, and he doesn't seem very happy about it. Or is he just confused? Meanwhile the rest of the disciples appear not so confident about this dubious plan. Can a child be the answer to our predicament?



Lucas Cranach, 1472-1553

Children and the elderly are often at the bottom of our list. We doubt they're capable of solving the serious problems of the world. Like the disciples, we're amazed when Jesus welcomes children and says we have to be like them in order to receive the kingdom of God! We're surprised when it's elderly Simeon and Anna who recognize the Saviour in the temple. We don't look where God looks for great movements of Spirit and salvation. We don't know where to look.

We can be so focussed on our scarcity, our lack of this or that, that we fail to recognize and value what we do have. To say, "Thank you Lord, for this little boy. Thank you for these fish, and these little loaves of bread. May we find in them the abundance we need."

Every time we pray the Lord's prayer we mouth those familiar words, "Give us this day our daily bread." But we're still anxious about it, aren't we? Still uncertain whether it will actually appear, or not. "Is this all there is, Lord? 'Cause I don't know if it's enough."



We are worriers by nature. We don't find it easy to trust. We struggle to believe. Sometimes we just can't do it. Which is why, in the end, even faith has to be a gift. Something given by God, rather than something we ourselves can manufacture. "Lord, help me trust your promises. And even if I can't, help me to live and act as though they were true, so that I may receive your blessing."



"Ask them to sit down," said Jesus. And they did. The crowd sat down, ready to receive. Jesus took the bread, blessed it and broke it.

By the way, isn't that what Jesus does every time he invites us to his table? He blesses and breaks what we place before him, and tells us to give it away.



"Take this barley loaf," says Jesus on the hillside, "and start handing it out, little by little. And keep doing it. Don't stop. "Let's just see what happens." Of course, Jesus *knew* what was going to happen! Remember how the story ends?

The disciples went out among the crowd handing out the pieces of food that Jesus gave them. One by one they went, reaching into their basket, pulling out another piece or two: one for you, one for you, two for you and your little child. And so it went. The disciples serving, the enormous crowd receiving. Until all were satisfied.



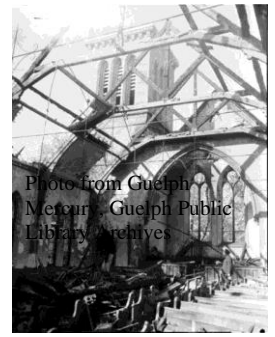
Notice: they were "satisfied". They were no longer hungry. They had enough. 12 baskets left over. Isn't that something!

Does Jesus still do this sort of thing? Can our little bit be all that Jesus needs? God's abundance is amazing. "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."



When I was a little boy, five years old, our church had a catastrophic fire. It was Victoria Day weekend and some kids from the neighbourhood were playing with firecrackers in the back alley. It started in some garbage cans and spread from there.

The first we heard was on the radio. Firefighters were on the scene trying to save the building. My dad went down to see if anything could be rescued before the whole building went up in flames. But there was nothing he could do.



In the months that followed, the congregation re-grouped. Plans were drawn up, a builder was hired. But how were we going to pay for it? I remember one evening a couple of visitors from the church came to our home. They were visiting everyone to determine what resources there might be. They laid out the plans on the coffee table. And they talked about the amount of money that needed to be raised.

What happened next, you may think, was naïve. I'd been there on the side, listening in. I knew what had happened and I knew they needed money. So I went to my room and got my piggy bank. I can picture it still, made of plastic, and shaped like a fat little pig. I brought it out. Here's what I could give.



They were taken aback and didn't quite know what to do with that. Neither them nor my parents. They hadn't set out to take advantage of children. All they wanted was my parents to pledge a little extra to the building fund.

But there was I with my entire life savings. I was glad to give it – every last penny, and I mean that literally because that's about all there was in the bank. What else would I do with it anyway? I had no other great ambitions. And somehow it seemed like Jesus would be pleased.

I didn't have to worry then about other things. My parents supplied my food and housing and clothing. There were no other demands, so it was an easy thing for me to do.

Still, to this day I keep coming back to that memory. I see it as a model that shaped my life in other ways as I grew older: Bringing my gifts, however inadequate they may seem, however insignificant they might be in relation to the sum total of what is required, and offering them in service to the Lord, that they may be used for some larger purpose. I am that little boy with five barley loaves and some fish to share. It's probably not enough. Even a child knows that.



As I grow older, I search for that child. Life is more complicated now. Choices are far from easy. As adults we are much more aware of how the world actually works and more realistic about what we ourselves can accomplish.

Maybe we're less trusting. Maybe we're more fearful. Maybe we're prone to cling to what we have. Maybe we've had some bad experiences in life, so now we pull back. "I'd be glad to share my fish, but it's only one. And really, how would it change anything if I did?"

So what's in *your* hand – may I ask? I know it's not your lunch. But what *is* there? What gift has God given to you to share with others today?

It might be something as simple as a bit of joy, a smile. Some act of kindness. A gift of baking for a neighbour. Some personal care items to send overseas, or to the homeless on our streets. Your wealth of experience. Maybe your wisdom. If your heart is big enough, maybe it is love. If your barns are full, maybe it is money.



What is in your hand? Are you afraid to open it? What do you have to contribute to the feast that Jesus sets before us? The feast he invites us to share with others? The great kingdom feast where all are welcome, and *none* are sent away hungry.



It's International Witness Sunday. A few weeks ago we had Sarah Wood come and share with us what she anticipates during her internship in Thailand. What Sarah gave to us that morning was the gift of her youthful enthusiasm. Her desire to experience new things and build bridges with others, and learn and grow. A willingness to help, where she is able. She spoke of the children at the school where she would be assisting. Her hand was *open*. Her gifts freely offered. And we were blessed.



The *Poovongs* too, Tom and Christine, are simply offering who they are: encouraging, discipling, looking for opportunities to share the life and teaching of Jesus. Their children are with them. What do they bring, I wonder?

In partnering with them, we too have gifts to share and blessings to be received. None of this goes only one way. When we enter relationships with other people, whether our next door neighbours or half a world away, we too find blessing. What might Christians in Thailand have to share with us in Saskatoon. Our circumstances are so different. But the world we live in is one, and the Lord we serve is the same. How might our community here at First Mennonite be influenced by the experience of others far away? I'm eager to find out!



What is in your hand? Let me tell you what is in *all* our hands. In this story from the Gospel of John the crowds come expecting to be fed. But they hardly know what it is they need. Do we ever really know? At the end of a long day they're glad to have some loaves and fishes.

The thing is, if that is all that Jesus gives them they will still be hungry. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35) "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" Eat this bread, and you will be satisfied. (John 6:51)



What is in your hand? The very best gift of God: the life of Jesus. The one thing you can share freely with others and never run out. Food that will nourish your soul – today and forever. Food for us. Food for the world. Thanks be to God!