

A Little Hope and a Touch of Grace

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

July 29, 2018

The Rev. Jennifer Adams

Text: Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

THANK YOU, Pastor Jill and thank you Hope Church! As I told the kids a few minutes ago, that's our message today. We're here with you this morning because just over 150 years ago, you gave us room to meet and to worship. And we as Grace Church are so very, very grateful. We began celebrating our sesquicentennial on June 10 and will continue through June 9, 2019. Part of the celebration is giving thanks for all that has helped us become and be Grace Church. And so we are here to say, "Thank you."

Pastor Gordon has referred to Hope and Grace as "Best Friend churches." And as it turns out, that relationship is part of our DNA. The people who were to become Grace Church began right here in your building. In 1866 those who were Hope Church (2nd Reformed at the time) provided space for some local yet relatively new to the area Episcopalians to worship and to meet to discern their way forward.

In fact the very first Episcopal worship service that ever happened in Holland, Michigan happened right here. Now the very second Episcopal worship service that ever happened was held at the Select School, so I'm not sure what went on at the first service... but through that entire phase of Grace Church's beginning, Hope Church members and leaders provided friendship and support. Our congregation's leaders worked together at the Select School which became the first of Grace Church's four sites and we worked together in the larger community on various efforts we valued. We were apparently BFFs from the very beginning.

Hope Church, you gave us space and encouragement to become. And I'm not sure there's a greater gift to be given. And so today, about seven thousand nine hundred and four Sunday services later, we've returned to say Thank You.

And to do that we've brought a preacher, a few Grace folks to share in worship, and we're also providing coffee hour. And for that we've brought five loaves and two fish (just to see what you guys really have going on here.)

Now I'm personally excited to be here not only because of the shared history and the good colleagues and good friends that you are, but also because in the Episcopal Church, (unless it's Michael Curry preaching,) we only give about 12-15 minutes for the sermon. And to be in a Reformed church where rumor has it the average is about 45, is an absolute thrill for me! Episcopalians would NEVER let me talk this long and so I'm truly grateful for this opportunity.

No worries, Jill has reigned me in earlier this week when I let it slip that I thought that was the timeframe. But given these time constraints, just so you know, I'm not going to touch David and Bathsheba about whom we heard in the first passage. I'll leave that up to my fine colleagues as the David story continues to unfold through the lectionary texts this summer.

Now there are also many among us who have worked on the histories of our congregations, Judy Parr, Paul Trap and Charles Huttar to name a few, and so I'll also leave the history detail to them. This morning, I simply want to touch on the gospel which provides a beautiful approach to gratitude and offers a glimpse into what can happen when good things are allowed to multiply.

Again there were crowds following Jesus, we just heard from the gospel passage. We've been hearing from the gospel of Mark over the last many weeks that Jesus had been traveling with his disciples back and forth and all around the Sea of Galilee and there were always crowds. The disciples had "crossed over" many times, traveled among villages, cities and farms, teaching, feeding, and healing. And in this dip into the gospel of John we hear those themes continued in a truly Johanine, but consistent way.

"A large crowd kept following him," John said, "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." And so these people had come with hope. It was hope that got them to the hillside that day or they wouldn't have been there at all. Hope for healing. Hope for blessing. Hope for something new.

Now the feast of the Passover was near. John unlike the other gospel authors makes a point to tell us that. This is the Jewish festival which commemorates

liberation and freedom and also the festival at which people offered the first fruits of grain.

And so when Jesus saw the crowd, you can bet that liberation and freedom were in his heart and on his mind and that his first thought was bread. And so, Jesus ran by Philip the challenge to feed the people. And Philip responded rather matter of factly that there was nowhere to buy bread, nor among them did they possibly have enough money to buy the quantity it would take to feed 5000 people. (As if Jesus didn't know that already.)

But, and this is a big BUT - there was a kid with five barley loaves and two fish. "And what are they among so many people?" Andrew asked. What are those among so many people? A question we ask all too often.

Because what the 5 loaves and 2 fish were was *enough, enough* to allow a miracle, or depending on how your ready it many miracles to happen.

Jesus received the bread and fish from the child. Then he had the people sit down, he gave thanks, and then they distributed the food to everyone who was there. And everyone ate "as much as they wanted," the gospel says. And not only that, but there were twelve baskets left over. Enough for the tribes. Enough for those who hadn't been able to make it to the hillside.

And then, the gospel continues there was a storm. We'll get to that in a minute.

First, I think the very brave person in this story (besides Jesus, he usually wins on that count,) the very brave person in this story was the kid, right? He was the first person to take a miracle-unfolding cue from Christ. While the disciples were still worried about the mileage to the nearest store and the cost of the bread, the child let go of his own bread and his own fish. And that letting go was a big deal because at that point there were no guarantees about outcome. The child just offered what he had. And so perhaps even more than courage, this kid simply had *hope*, hope that something bigger than five loaves and two fish could happen. He had enough hope to let go and to trust.

Then there were those first people who sat down, those first people who rather than racing down the hill to be the first ones on the boat or the first people back to their village took the risk of settling in in grass on the hillside. And then they passed the baskets - sharing the food that had been made for them. Nobody

hoarding. Nobody worried about with whom they were eating – which was a big deal in itself. And so perhaps these people believed that there could be *grace*, hospitality and food enough for all.

And in the end, the gospel tells us about 5000 people had eaten all that they wanted and there were 12 baskets left. There was enough for everyone to take home to their people, their people who were scattered as tribes, divided by historical circumstance and some long running family feuds, but a people now united by this shared and I'd go so far as to say “holy” meal.

A holy meal that started with a child's five loaves and two fish. And with thanks offered, and with some hope and a little grace tossed in, there was food for all. There was a miracle!

Which is apparently how this works. For us too. Thank you, Hope Church for allowing a few Episcopalians to come forward in this community with what was in the eyes of many a rather measly offering. And thank you for receiving what was not only measly but threatening to some. Sacramental, liturgical worship with a Book of Common Prayer that had only recently let go of prayers to the Queen wasn't exactly a welcome guest in most circles in these parts in 1866. And these Episcopalians not only wanted to speak English, but most of them did not know Dutch. Nevertheless, you allowed us to sit down here. You allowed us to sit in circles and share bread here.

And in Christ, with Christ, that was transformed from “measly” and “threatening,” into “enough.” Enough to gather around. Enough to pray with. Enough to feed people through. The presence of Hope with a touch of Grace allowed gifts to be multiplied in ways that are still feeding many. In ways that have fed way over 5000 in fact. And so I think we experienced something like a miracle.

Often in this world, people are too afraid to allow others space to become. Too often, we're too afraid to allow gifts to multiply. We depend on scarcity for power rather than trusting goodness in abundance. And we see that dynamic play out all the time. What happens if we hold human rights in a place of gratitude and offer them, multiply and share them rather than allowing them to be held tightly by a fearful few? What happens if we hold healthcare with a spirit of gratitude and allow it to be multiplied and shared? What about shelter,

affordable shelter. How about citizenship? How about forgiveness, creativity, mercy, good news? That's the rhythm of this story: there is an offering. There is thanksgiving. There is hope and there is grace. Gifts are multiplied and a miracle comes to be. And sure, there's often a storm that follows, but according to this gospel, we, with Christ can handle that too.

There is so much more to be given, so much more to be shared, and it's all just a miracle away. Which means that it's only one offering away. It's only five loaves and two fish away. Which isn't that far at all. With a little hope and a touch of grace, anything is possible.

In the words of the Epistle this morning: May Christ dwell in our hearts as we are being rooted and grounded in love. May we have the power to comprehend, the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (and calculations of mileage and cost,) so that we may be filled (not only with bread) but with all the fullness of God. And to him who by the power at work within us, (through our at times measly but hope and grace-filled offerings) is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

Thank you, Hope Church. Amen.

Amen.