

## John 6:1-21

6 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. 16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 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. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21 Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Today we return to John's version of last week's story, the feeding of the five thousand. For John, they are more than miracles. They are occasions for the revealing of Jesus' true nature as God incarnate.

The story of the feeding of the thousands is found in all four gospels, and it occurs six times: four times, once in each gospel is the feeding of the five thousand and two gospels, Mark and Matthew have a second feeding story about feeding the four thousand. It is the only story of a miracle performed by Jesus that appears in all four gospels. This miracle was central to Jesus' mission and identity for the early church. It said who he was and what we are called to do, which helps me understand why the Revised Common Lectionary, a set of selected passages for each week used by

many traditional churches, selects it twice in a row, one from Mark last week and one from John this week.

The story starts as Jesus can't get away from the crowds following him. They have seen him heal so many folks that they won't leave him alone. Jesus only manages a few moments of respite with the disciples before the crowds are at him again.

Jesus asks Phillip, "Where we are going to get enough bread to feed these folks?" and Phillip says, "It would take more money than we have to buy enough bread to feed these folks." Andrew pipes up, "There is a lad here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what good is that?"

They fear that there is not enough money and resources for all those in need of food. Jesus shows them they have enough, and they should depend on God's abundance to overcome their fear and belief in scarcity, a fear we often share with those disciples. We have enough to do God's will.

Then Jesus enacts this in a display of divine abundance. He has the crowd seated in a lush, grassy area and miraculously feeds them with plenty left over. This abundance is a reminder of God's grace and provision.

John wants to understand that this really was a miracle.

He really did feed the people, and as he said in last week's story, "You give them something to eat," which was a command that we continue to work to create a world where no one goes hungry.

Jesus fed the hungry and commanded us to do the same. Ending hunger is not just an individual and socio-political issue. It is a Jesus issue.

How serious is hunger in our world today? Everywhere the problem is poor distribution caused by many socio-economic and political factors. In our country, hunger is in a different order than it is for a significant portion of our world. However, even in our great land, between one in six to one in eight people rely on food assistance to have enough to eat. Though there is no real famine or starvation, a great number of people need help having access to healthy foods and, indeed, food in general.

You have probably heard of food deserts. They are described by the Annie E Casey Foundation as geographic areas where residents have few to no convenient options for securing affordable and healthy foods — especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Disproportionately found in high-poverty areas, food deserts create extra, everyday hurdles that can make it harder for kids, families and communities to grow healthy and strong.

Generally speaking, food deserts are more common in areas with:

- smaller populations;
- higher rates of abandoned or vacant homes; and

- residents who have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and higher rates of unemployment.

<https://www.aecf.org/blog/exploring-americas-food-deserts>

That is what we deal with in our nation.

However, in the rest of the world there is not only the need for food assistance, but people are also facing famine and starvation.

Up to one in four people in our world rely on food assistance, and 9% are actually chronically malnourished in some areas like Gaza, Ethiopia, Yemen, and South Sudan. This situation is even more dire, and famine, the absence of food to survive and thrive, is a constant reality and global emergency.

Jesus fed the hungry and calls us to do the same yet when we look at the worldwide problem, this feels so overwhelming that we wonder what we can do to make a difference. Like the disciples, we don't think we have enough or that it is impossible.

As individuals, we can, and we do several things, for example, our monthly noisy can collection and our gifts of food for our local food pantry. We work in our community to provide healthy, nutritious food for all. Our deacons provide emergency food boxes to help people between the times when the pantries are open and an emergency strikes. We also support our food pantries through gifts from our Burt Fund Endowment. And individually, many of us support other worthy charities. We do many things.

I call this the stone soup approach. You know the story:

Some travelers come to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. Upon their arrival, the villagers are unwilling to share any of their food stores with the very hungry travelers. Then the travelers go to a stream and fill the pot with water, drop a large stone in it, and place it over a fire. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what they are doing. The travelers answer that they are making "stone soup", which tastes wonderful, and that they would be delighted to share with the villagers, although it still needs a little bit of garnish, which they are missing, to improve the flavor.

The villager, who anticipates enjoying a share of the soup, does not mind parting with a few carrots, so these are added to the soup. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the pot, and the travelers again mention their stone soup which has not yet reached its full potential. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient, like potatoes, onions, cabbages, peas, celery, tomatoes, sweetcorn, meat (like chicken, pork, and beef), milk, butter, salt and pepper. Finally, the stone (being inedible) is removed from the pot, and a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is enjoyed by travelers and villagers alike. Although the travelers have thus tricked the villagers

into sharing their food with them, they have successfully transformed it into a tasty meal that they share with the donor.

Like the village, we share and people get fed. That is vital for our neighbors who Jesus commanded us to love and feed.

And still, we know that it takes more than individual and church charity to combat hunger here and abroad. On a national and worldwide level, we support the Presbyterian Hunger Program through One Great Hour of Sharing, and they work on our behalf to fight hunger on an individual and social level throughout the world. In addition, many of you also support worldwide programs that combat hunger. We need to realize that we can demand our elected leaders see world hunger as a real threat to global peace and security. Remember, this is not a red or blue issue. It is a matter of our core beliefs. It is a Jesus issue. And we can educate ourselves on the dimensions of the problem.

We have heard more times than we can count that there is not a world food shortage problem. There is a global problem with distribution. There is more than enough; it just doesn't get distributed well. I scanned the internet to try to find information on this, and it is hard to nail down specifics. I found that the following offers a good summary.

### 1. **Global Food Insecurity:**

- An estimated **37.2 million people** across **47 countries** will be in **Emergency or worse levels of acute food insecurity** in 2024. These individuals require immediate emergency assistance to save lives and livelihoods<sup>1</sup>.
- Over **282 million people** in **59 countries and territories** suffered from **acute food insecurity** in 2023, representing a **24 million increase** compared to the previous year<sup>2</sup>.

### 2. **Malnourished Children:**

- Approximately **24.5 million children** are predicted to be **acutely malnourished** in the **15 countries with the highest burden** in 2024<sup>1</sup>.

We must not minimize the real bread Jesus gave the people - as much as they wanted, which would have been a double miracle for people for who having enough food and enough daily bread was a real issue. He feeds them abundantly, and he wants us to do the same.

But what about you and me? After all, we are not hungry, and we have the resources to have enough to eat and are blessed that we can share. The symbolism of the story speaks to us.

Just like Jesus feeds the body with bread, he will feed our spirits. Jesus' feeding is saying something about the abundance of God's love and at the same time, revealing himself as the incarnation of that love.

Jesus comes to satisfy our spiritual hunger, as Bruce Springsteen sings Everybody's got a Hungry Heart. We have a spirit that finds completion in God, and Jesus comes to us as God in person to put an end to that hunger as well. This not only satisfies our soul but enables us to have the desire to feed all his sheep, body and spirit. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 25. It is the spirit of Jesus in our heart that compels us to care for the world's hungry as we recall his words in Matthew 25:35-40:

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35 for I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing, I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

When we feed those, we are meeting Jesus in our lives, and that satisfies the hunger in our hearts.