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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Be the Miracle*

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ November 13, 2011

John 6:1-14

After this 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. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 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?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "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. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 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."

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

In the last several years some churches have begun to do an interesting thing on the 5th Sunday of the month; and depending on the year there might be 4 or 5 of them. Instead of gathering for worship on that 5th Sunday they have gone out into the community and joined together in some kind of service in a place of need in their neighborhood.

Our session considered that a while back as well but we decided that worship was so central and essential to whom we are that we wouldn't want to communicate to our friends and neighbors that to forgo worship in favor of service was a better thing. *Because* for us it's not an either/or question. It's not like we can only do one and we have to choose between the 2; no, in fact *each week* our worship leads us into the world where we seek to be about God's work.

What we've been hearing from some of the sharing in our service today captures just a little bit of how we are "being followers of Christ" during the week out in our world. Not just 4 or 5 times a year but *every day*: according to the gifts God has given us and the passion he's put in our hearts we are serving Christ in our community. Some serve in the programs and ministry of this church, some serve as mentors to kids and youth whether it be coaching soccer, helping out in schools or working with the Bill Wilson center. Some serve in their place of business, some teach, some take on roles of leadership in our community serving on the school board or commissions or other organizations. We're a church that believes that faith is not a part-time thing but something that informs and energizes our lives each day.

So when it comes to the 5th Sunday thing we don't think the distinction between work and worship is a valid one. And in fact today we want to further highlight that connection between what we do here in the sanctuary and how we live our lives in society. We want to bring those two closer together in time today so that we more literally leave worship and enter into a work together that addresses the needs of the world. So today in our service we're putting a focus on feeding the hungry and then *after* service we'll have the opportunity to join together in a couple of different activities to make a dent and difference in the problem of hunger in our community. We're calling it "work-ship": a more evident and obvious connection between what happens in our worship service and how we live out our service in the world.

When we turn to our text we find there a surprising hero: a little boy with 5 loaves and 2 fish naïve enough to believe that that a little given to Jesus, becomes a lot. Let me just set the scene here for a minute: Jesus' ministry so far has been characterized by many miraculous signs. People were healed, blind eyes opened, lepers have been cleansed, and the people are getting enthused. But in the beginning of chapter 6 Jesus leaves the crowds, gets in a boat and sets off across the Sea of Galilee (or the Sea of Tiberias, as it was also called).

The people who have witnessed these miraculous signs see him leave and yet they are hungry for more. And so they begin to run along the shore keeping an eye on Jesus' boat trying to figure out where he is going so they can be there when he lands.

The trouble is they ended up farther from home than they had realized such that it's well past the time for their main meal and yet they're now in an area so remote that there is no place to find food. When Jesus looked up and saw all these people in such need, he turns to Philip and says, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip is flabbergasted. First off, they are out in the boonies and even if they could get to a village there is no way there be enough food there to feed this many people. But that's not all of it. Philip does a quick calculation in his head and realizes that it would take half a year's salary to buy that much bread even if it *were* available! For Philip, his inability to see a solution kept him from doing anything. But there's a little boy who

sees things differently. Philip looks at the crowd and throws up his hands in despair; the little boy looks at his lunch and *opens* his hands to give.

We face a similar problem as Philip's today and even more so because our media now exposes us to suffering on a global scale. What Philip saw one day on the shores of the Sea of Galilee is amplified a thousand times for us every day in the news. It bombards us until we grow numb. How can we help? What can we do? What is our responsibility to those in need? If our own resources are all that we have, these questions will quickly lead us to despair.

No doubt there were some in the crowd who did have food - surely the little boy could not have been the only one; in fact I think there are probably 2 miracles here: the more obvious one of Jesus miraculously multiplying the loaves and fish. But I think equally miraculous was that as the sharing began people who had *planned* to hold on to what they had were suddenly willing to hand it out to others. There's both a miracle of multiplication here as well as a miracle of generosity!

If the little boy had stopped to think whether he could make a difference, he would have given up and not tried. But it seems that he wasn't thinking about making a difference, he just *WAS* different. He wasn't trying to accomplish a miracle; he was just *being* the miracle! Out of a crowd of 5,000, only this kid had the 'foolishness' to believe that a little given to Jesus can become a lot.

Did he know that his small lunchbox would create a feast for thousands? Probably not. Did he think that his lunch could solve the enormous problem before them that day? I seriously doubt it. But did he look and see that he had *something* that he could share and did he say yes to making what he had available to others? Absolutely! And *because he gave* many were fed.

You know, that's the way we want to be here at our church. We want to be a part of God's work in the world; we want to be about giving of ourselves in order to make a difference in the lives of others.

A little boy was asked what parable in the Bible he liked the best. He said, "The one about the fellow that loafs and fishes. "That's not us. We're not a church that just sits back, takes it easy and does whatever we please. We're a church that takes seriously Jesus' words, "You give them something to eat!" – a church that takes what we have – as small as it may seem to us – and gives it to be used by God in ministry to others. Friends, as we leave this service we go out to serve – and on this day in particular we celebrate "work-ship": our call and commitment to be partners with God in the world!