

Pentecost 9 - 2015

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-14

Very occasionally, when flipping through the television channels, I'll stop on an infomercial. Infomercials, with their grandiose claims, I find to be rather ludicrous and; I have to confess, I used to make fun of them. I remember the old saying, "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." Just imagine though: Lose 30 pounds in 30 days while eating pizza! This knife cuts through nails like it cuts through warm butter! Order within the next 10 minutes and we'll pay off your mortgage! But wait – there's more. All those whose last names begin with the letters A – K, call in the next ten minutes. All others call tomorrow. I'm still waiting for my "Greatest Hits of Slim Whitman" bonus album.

As I think about our Bible reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, it sounds suspiciously like an infomercial: "unlimited resources – far more – than we ever – dare to ask – or even dream of – infinitely beyond." I want to believe that and I hope you do too. I do believe it and I hope you do also. So let's take a closer look at those claims and let's look at Paul's Letter and the gospel. I think there's a real tie-in between the two. They're both about abundance: the abundance Paul writes about in his Letter and the abundance of the barley loaves and the fish in the feeding of the crowd in the gospel.

John's gospel presents his account of Jesus' feeding 5,000 men, not counting women and children. We don't know exactly how many, but we can be sure it was a crowd. The crowds kept following Jesus, we hear. In verse 5, the situation comes to a head – a large crowd is coming towards Jesus and the disciples and Jesus asks Philip, "Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?" I expect Philip and the rest of the disciples want to please Jesus and this may be a panicky moment for them. How indeed?

The story seems believable. John takes great pains to provide the details. At several points he elaborates on the size of the crowd, how much it would cost to feed them (six months' wages), and how much was gathered up after the meal. In contrast to the magnitude of the crowd, the extraordinary cost of feeding them from the market and how much was left over afterwards; John is quite clear that the feeding was a miracle. How could the young boy's gifts of loaves and fish feed the equivalent of a small town, when it wasn't enough to feed Jesus and his twelve disciples? But on the other hand, it also seems too unbelievable to be true.

Our modern culture has a hard time with miracles and tries to explain them away. But I wonder if there were actually two miracles that day. One, of course, was the miracle of feeding the people. But possibly more important than that, there was a miracle of the child's sharing, without which the miracle of feeding would never have been. I hope you can hear the words of Jesus ringing in your ears: "Unless you become as children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Children tend to be gullible and trusting. They don't always get it right away. They live more often by faith than do adults. But we are asked to have that same kind of faith. Seems like Paul, too, was expecting his readers to think this might be too good to be true. He closes his prayer with a blessing to pull them in as well: "Now glory be to God, Who by His mighty power at work within us, is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of" (v. 20).

Everything Paul asked God to do in verses 16-19 is God's power at work within us. With that kind of power, with Christ more at home in our hearts, God can do *far more* in and through us than we even know to ask for.

But is there a typo there? God can also do so much more than we can ask or *imagine!* Really?

The typo isn't in the text, it's in our response. There are two potential problems.

First, our imagination is bland. Some people will have no problem believing what God can do because they don't believe in God for anything big. We pray small. We pray for that cold to get better, and it will, eventually. We ask for wisdom in a decision because it's the Christian thing to do. We thank God for the nice meal, even if it's not our favorite.

But Jesus has taught us a no-risk/no-reward approach to faith. When the bleeding woman touched Jesus' cloak, he said, "Your faith has made you well" (Matthew 9:22). He said the same thing to the blind man in Mark 10:52.

Remember the story of when impassioned friends trashed a rooftop to bring their buddy to Jesus. A soldier knew Jesus could heal from a distance. A prostitute broke into a private dinner to worship Christ amid a gathering of religious leaders.

If we ask small and imagine small, we can expect small.

But what happens if we dream? Risk? Choose faith? Pray big?

The second potential problem is that our imagination may be in great shape, which can lead to unmet expectations. Remember how Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come; your will be done"? On his deathbed in the garden, Jesus prayed, "Yet, not my will, but yours be done."

Imagine anything. Ask big. But always remember that, for the sincere follower of Christ, "yours" trumps "mine." We can ask big, but while God is omniscient and omnipotent, we aren't. We don't always perceive God at work. We don't have the foresight to see the best answers where we don't expect them or want them.

In Joshua 3, the Israelites are *finally* set to enter the promised land. They have only the Jordan River in front of them. Trouble is, the Jordan is ripping along at its full strength and breadth. It was flood season (v. 15).

But as soon as the priests faithfully stepped into the river, the Jordan started "rising up in a single heap far off at Adam" (v. 16). Archaeologists guess that the city of Adam may have been 20 miles far off.

In other words, God was doing something huge, but nobody could see it happening. They saw only the results downriver.

Pastor and author Brian Jones says it wonderfully: "God is always at work upstream in our lives."

God exists outside of our five senses, and he often works outside of them as well. We can't see it, touch it or hear it.

Yet ... until we can see, touch, and hear, we imagine. We dream. We risk faith.

This passage moves us to prayer. Paul prays big to a big God (vv. 16-19). Based on who God is, the implication for us is to pray big as well.

If we can imagine it, God can exceed it.

And it's not even about needing to ask for what we need. The gospel story is about what Jesus wants to do. Unlike in the other gospels, Jesus is not moved here by his compassion. No one had been complaining that they were hungry. No murmurs from the crowd. No restlessness. Nothing even from the disciples. There is no excitement among the crowd. This is not a group of people caught up in the mystery of the feeding. It's not like a bunch of baseball fans waiting to see if a pitcher can pull off a no-hitter. Will these 5,000 people really be fed by five loaves and two tiny fish?

In the story, at least, no one seems to care. The story is less about the magic than about the man. It is Jesus who suggests the meal; it is Jesus who distributes it.

John wants a miracle story. Jesus just wants people to be fed.

Jesus knows our needs. We are creatures who have basic needs: food and water, shelter and clothing. These four things are the necessities of life. Throughout His preaching, Jesus talked about food and water. We literally can't live without them. I suspect the people in Jesus' time would have understood perfectly, as we do today, that when Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven" or "I am the living water," what he was really saying

was, “You can’t live without me.” The implication of his words is that He is a basic necessity of life. He is as necessary to sustaining life as food and water. Unfortunately, there are some who chase after the wrong things – who hunger for the wrong things. A basic question that every believer has to answer is, “What are you hungry for?”

If you’re looking for a Jesus who will fatten your 401(k), guarantee a cure for your cancer, offer you “10 easy steps to a perfect family,” land you a great job or restore each and every one of your relationships, then you’ve got the wrong Jesus. There are plenty of Jesus’ people who can help with such things, and indeed the Scriptures offer plenty of guidance on such things. But Jesus himself has different things to tend to.

Jesus didn’t come to perfect *your* life; he came to lay down *his* life and take it back up again, as he himself said (John 10:18). His death and resurrection, then, are a “meal” that sustains our souls, bringing wholeness, healing and growth. When we come **to** Jesus, and **for** Jesus, we **receive** Jesus. When our souls are fed and filled by the work of Jesus, we may still go through seasons of illness, unemployment or even a lack of food. But one thing we will never, ever be is — empty.

Furthermore, when we fill ourselves with Jesus, we find that many of our other cravings in life, such as a need for purpose and meaning, become satisfied; freeing us to view the issues that affect our day-to-day lives with contented eyes and an eternal perspective.

So, *what are you hungry for?* It’s a great question. It’s a question that goes beyond what you do to quench a midday craving. It’s a question that — if you allow it — tugs at much deeper drives and desires. Jesus invites us to feast on the Food that offers true sustenance for our souls. Jesus feeds us not so that he can meet our needs, but rather knowing that he is all we need.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah: *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare* (Isaiah 55:2 NIV).

What are you hungry for, or in other words, what are your expectations of Jesus today?

That is the question for churches as well. In an age of declining membership and declining attendance and participation, in an age of reduced giving, every congregation asks, “Where do we find the resources to meet all the hungers of the world?” There is poverty, spiritual bankruptcy, people crying out for justice. With confidence in Jesus and a God who can provide far more than we can ask or even imagine, we can proceed knowing that we can meet any and every need, not only with enough, but with baskets left over which we can then carefully manage for another day. But it takes faith and confidence and action.

There’s an old story about a village that was planning a great celebration. The village elders decided that each household would contribute a pitcher of wine, which would be placed in a great barrel. Then, at the feast, each villager could come and draw wine for the celebration. But each one thought: What will my little pitcher mean in that enormous barrel? So, instead of wine, each villager brought a pitcher of water. On the day of the feast the barrel was tapped, and only water came out. There was no celebration.

I believe that Jesus does create food for 5,000 and that is a miracle. But the miracle is also that a small boy had enough childlike faith to share his lunch, and that started others digging around in their back packs and lunch bags, and soon they realized there was more than enough for everyone. Jesus can feed 5,000, but the real miracle may be freeing people to be generous and confident in Jesus’ ability and desire to give us more than we need to do the work He has for us to do.

If Christ is in your heart, you have an incredible power of love – greater than you can even imagine. We do not have all the answers to our challenges, but we don’t have to have them now. We need faith that as we work and give, Jesus will provide enough. Cooperating with God’s abundance is not always easy. We often behave out of a sense of scarcity, clamoring to meet our own needs at the expense of others. What would we

do differently if we allowed ourselves to truly believe that God's grace is sufficient – more than enough? What anxiety would we let go of? What new ways of relating to others might we begin?

What if...

the miracle of the loaves and fishes is still possible.

all the people in North America who have enough—and that is most of us—shared just a little more. Say, a dollar a week? We wouldn't even notice.

If all of us who have enough did that, there's be enough to feed all those in North America who don't have enough.

What if Canada and the United States decide to change tactics? What if we decide to change our way of maintaining our international security? What if we stopped being paranoid and started being generous? What if, instead of spending money on armaments, we spent it on justice – on food and medicine and education and development for two-thirds of the world? Our countries would be so admired, so respected for our generosity; no one would dare attack us.

And who knows, if we did it, other countries might too. And we'd discover there really is enough to go around and we wouldn't need to protect our backsides or our front sides or any other sides.

It's totally impractical of course: sounds too good to be true. Who would think of such a crazy idea?

A small child might.

A small boy thought of it on the shore of the Galilee 2000 years ago. A small boy didn't think, "What will I eat?" And instead thought, 'I have something to share!'

When we have the glorious, unlimited resources of the Holy Spirit and Christ more and more at home in our hearts, we become what Paul might describe as the Far More Church: "far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of." Only our imagination limits our opportunities. What would a Far More Church look like?

- Far More giving to missions?
- Far More evangelism?
- Far More hospitality?
- Far More love for our neighbors?
- Far More youth in the Church?

Consider a Far Less Church, the mirror image of the Far More Church:

- Far Less wavering and doubting?
- Far Less negativity?
- Far Less unfriendliness?
- Far Less rigidity?
- Far Less fear?

"Now glory be to God, Who by His mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask, or even dream; infinitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, or hopes. May He be given glory forever and ever, through endless ages because of His master plan of salvation for the church through Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:20-21). God's power is already at work within us to challenge us to change, not to increase our comfort. Can you imagine believers who go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, forgive those who sin against them and love their enemies? Can you fathom the training, the discipline, the exercise, the pain to produce believers that are strong and muscular?

Miracles cause us to ask the question – if "x" can happen, then who is to say what else could happen? The sky's the limit and everything enters the realm of possibility. God is big enough – big enough to make possible what we might think is impossible.