



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday Next before Advent - November 22, 2015

*“When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten.”*

## ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

There is an old adage that I heard during my first year in Seminary, that when a pastor is preaching, he's often preaching to the guy in the pulpit as much or more than he's preaching to the people in the pews. It's both an amusing anecdote and perhaps a bit of a warning to make sure that what you're saying is the Gospel truth, and not a bunch of self-serving nonsense.

I thought of that this week when I was working on this sermon. It was an incredible honor when I was invited to join the preaching rotation at our parish, and I was greatly humbled by it. So every time I was privileged to have my turn, I would sit down and just really just light into my sermon. Granted, sometimes that meant that I created a bunch of nonsense the first time through, and I'd have to go back and re-write half of it...or more; but every one, I approached with zeal.

Yet the fact is, when I sat down to work on this one, I just stared at my materials and nothing came out. I can't blame the source material, because the feeding of the five thousand is the topic of innumerable books, research papers, and sermons by preachers more gifted than I.

The more I read, though, the more I saw what my problem really was, so forgive me if I indulge in preaching to myself a little bit. We have been, as a family, in good shape and in reasonably good health. But with a baby due before Christmas and a house that needs some work done, I wound up praying at the start of the day “oh God, get me through the day.” And I wound up praying at the end of the every day, “oh God, thank you for getting me through that day.” And I realized while reading the Gospel appointed for today that I had been praying incorrectly the whole time; because fact is, God doesn't give us “enough.” We don't find “enough” in Jesus Christ. What we find, if we'll put aside the desire to see everything through a strictly analytical lens, what we find is that in Christ Jesus, we have abundance. And it's there for the asking. The abundance is there if we have faith, and if we trust that miracles can and do still happen.

That, to me, is what is really, really intriguing about this. It's not simply that Jesus created something from nothing, or from very little; it shouldn't surprise us that God amongst us who had cured lepers and raised people from the dead, could also feed people. It's a profoundly important moment, but compared to raising people from the dead, and indeed beating death itself after three days in the tomb at the

end [spoiler alert], feeding folks seems on the surface perhaps a bit less miraculous.

The thing is, while we know the actual institution of Sacrament of the Eucharist from which we get the canon of the Mass happened at the last supper, this prefiguring miracle illustrates the function of it so much more. In performing this miracle, Jesus is not merely feeding the stomachs of the five thousand, He is showing in a far more illustrative way that He is the bread of life, the spiritual food that will feed mankind and nourish our souls. This feeding of the masses is a bold declaration that He is the thing which will sustain and nourish all those who dare to put their faith in Him. What's more, he puts his apostles to work feeding the people this early sacrament, and establishes that any apostle or priest that follows in their footsteps is to be a servant of all those who would follow them, and continue to feed them this bread of life in both word and sacrament.

There's a reason this is the one miracle that is recorded in kind by all four of the evangelists - while we gather how we are to live as Christians and conduct our worship in church, this miracle is an amazingly subtle summary of how the church works - the Word of God is preached, the ministers serve the people in their charge, and nobody is turned away from being fed both spiritually and corporeally, and we rely on a simple faith to allow it to happen.

But the miracle isn't finished yet, as the exclamation point at the end of the narrative is that there were twelve baskets left. They ate until they were full. They didn't just eat until they were no longer hungry to the point of fainting. No, they ate until they were full and it's obvious that they ate until they were *well* full. It's not just that they ate until they were full, they ate until they were satisfied. And only in Christ, the bread of Heaven, can that satisfaction be found. Jesus didn't just give them as much as they needed, He gave them an *abundance*; and at the end, he told them to gather up what remained, that *nothing be wasted*.

We cannot view life as something to endure. In Jesus, there is abundance. And in that abundance, life goes from being something we say we need to "get through," to something we celebrate. And through that abundance, we can help *others* to celebrate life. When somebody we love is drained and has very little left, and perhaps can only muster "oh God, get me through this day," the fact that we

are blessed with our own proverbial basket of leftovers, will allow us to minister to them, and to be a blessing to them.

Maybe there are times where we don't want our problems to Christ, because there's over a billion people in the world and we feel too small. But in Christ there is an abundance of understanding. Or perhaps we don't want to go to Christ for forgiveness of our sins, because maybe it's one we've struggled with for a long time - weeks, months, maybe decades? And we're shy to ask forgiveness *not* because we don't mean it, but because we think Jesus is sick of hearing it when He knows we'll probably just goof up again; but in Jesus, there's an abundance of forgiveness. Or perhaps you've lost the faith altogether and wish you knew where to find it again; maybe you just show up here every week because we have the best choir and the best coffee hour and the best Communion wine in Maryland. And you want to find that faith again, but you don't know how; in Christ, there is abundant grace, and all He asks is for what you likely already have - a bit of faith no larger than a mustard seed. Nurture it, and He'll handle the rest...but don't wait forever; Advent is a great time to reboot.

So the next time we pray, let's not just pray to "get by." Jeremiah 29:11 says "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" Let's pray for more than getting by - not for our own glory, but to serve others. If you're mourning, don't just pray that you'll be consoled - pray that your mourning will be turned to joy (Jer 31:13), as the Bible says, so that you may help others who are mourn. If you are sick, don't just pray that you'll feel better - pray that you'll be so healed, you can serve the sick.

This is a great Sunday to revel in our abundance, and to give thanks for our abundance. Next Sunday is our first Sunday in Advent. It's the Sunday where our liturgy and our prayers and our church everything are geared to focus us on the what is the most important event in the history of mankind - **the** epoch of our existence, God joining His creation as one of them. It's a wonderful to focus on our abundance, so that next week, when we prepare to cast away all the things of this world, and pray and meditate about the incarnation and the birth of the Messiah, we can have fresh in our minds, all the ways God blesses us over and above "enough." *Amen*