

Psalm 36:5-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgements are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

John 6:2-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

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."

I read that according to someone's calculations, it is possible,
that if you cut regular bread into small enough pieces, >1/2 gram,
that you can get 1000 pieces from a single loaf of bread,
and that from 5 loaves there could be enough
to give a tiny bit to each person in a crowd of 5000...

... so they figure it really wasn't necessarily that Jesus
miraculously provided an abundance of bread to eat,
but that each person was satisfied with just a tiny bit,
and used really tiny baskets to gather all the crumbs,

**which serves to explain away any mystery of the miraculous
in the feeding of the crowd of 5000 with a little boy's lunch.**

In the 1800's, a German scholar suggested another explanation,
that when the young boy offered to share his meager lunch,
it shamed others in the crowd into also sharing theirs,

- and as it turns out,
lots of folks had a fish sandwich tucked in their robe that day,
and so even after everyone had eaten all they wanted,
there were still 12 baskets of scraps to be gathered...

**... which is another way to explain away the wonder of the
miraculous feeding of the 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish.**

I don't know and don't really care exactly how Jesus did it.
And while to some, it may be interesting to speculate
on various natural explanations of the miraculous,
those speculations often become a distraction
that can lead us away from the point of the story.

Such attempts to demystify and scientifically explain miracles
are asking the wrong questions and missing the point
and the spiritual truth that the Lord intended to convey,
which is to inform, encourage and strengthen **our faith**.

Guided by the Spirit, the writers of the gospels chose from
many more stories, miracles and events than they included --
-- selecting those that would be most helpful and meaningful
to the people of their own Christian communities
as they struggled for faith and hope amid persecution.

This story of the miraculous feeding of the 5000
must have been very important to those early Christians.
It is the only miracle story other than the resurrection
of Jesus that is included in all four of the gospels.

As John tells that story about the Good News of Jesus,
this is the second sign or miracle of his earthly ministry.

In the Gospel of John, the first miracle that the author mentions
is a wonderful story about grace and what God is really like.

It begins with Jesus, his mother and disciples
at a wedding in the rural, peasant village of Cana.

In those days, a wedding was a week-long celebration,
a very public affair that involved the whole village
for a time of joyful feasting, festivity and frivolity.

In that culture, to run out of wine on such an important occasion,
would be a social disaster of epic and lasting proportions,
and would be understood as an extreme & public insult
to the bride's family, their friends and community...
... and so Jesus responded by producing an abundance of very fine wine.

Beyond just telling this story about a miraculous event,
it is included in John as a prophetic or symbolic sign
that will point to why Jesus came and helps explain
the purpose, mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The story is a foretaste of the Gospel that Jesus came to accomplish.

The stone jars of water Jesus used were for Jewish purity rituals,
and were now, a sign of God reaching down to unworthy sinners

with the sacrificial, gracious love of Jesus Christ.

The abundance of fine wine given into a hopeless situation,

is being used as a symbol and metaphor for **the limitless** love for lost, broken sinners.

abundance of God's gracious

**Jesus took 180 gallons of legalism, ritual purification & guilt,
and he transformed them into 180 gallons of grace and mercy...**

... which is also the point of the Psalm 36 passage, vs. 5, 7-8

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

That phrase, "steadfast love" is from the Hebrew word, "hesed"

and an important idea that flows all through the Old Testament.

The root of the word, "hesed"

is a mother's absolute self-giving love for her little child

that in the ideal, never fails, weakens or ever gives up,

as in **God's unending love for all the people he created.**

The first sign in John's Gospel was that miracle at Cana

where Jesus turned water into an abundance of fine wine,

and the second, is this story, when a young boy's meager lunch

became an abundance of bread, enough to feed a huge crowd...

**... so together, the wine & bread suggest the sacrament of Communion,
which is a sign revealing the grace and abundant mercy of God.**

Both stories are all grace and Gospel, with no restraints or limits.

Taken together the stories are intended to demonstrate

unexpected abundance in the midst of perceived scarcity.

**John also tells the story to show the stark contrast between a
perspective focused on this world or focused on the Lord, vs. 5-6,**

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.

In John, Jesus is always fully in charge and in control, and the test is about revealing the true nature and strength of Philip's faith.

**The test is, how will Philip and the disciples
respond to a challenging and difficult situation,
and how will faith be a part of how they see things?**

Philip answers by making a few quick calculations, vs. 7,

Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."
... therefore, we do not have resources sufficient for the task.

So then his brother Andrew takes a shot at the test question, vs. 9

There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?
... therefore, we do not have resources sufficient for the task.

Philip's answer was focused on the immensity of the crowd,
on the great difficulty and size of the task,
and that it was far beyond anything they could manage.

Andrew's focus was on how meager their resources were,
that the young boy's little lunch wouldn't go very far
and the little they had wouldn't make a difference anyway.

Now Philip was quite right in his initial assessment ---
6 months wages really would not buy enough food for that crowd.

Andrew was also right in his assessment ---
those 5 tiny barley loaves and 2 small fish would not
make much difference for such a huge and hungry crowd.

The point is to see beyond limitations through the eyes of faith.

**The boy's lunch really was an insignificant almost nothing
toward alleviating the hunger of such a great crowd,
yet offered to Jesus, it became sufficient for God's work.**

Through this sign or miracle story,
Jesus is teaching us that ultimately life is about
the goodness, truth, promises, blessings and purpose of God,
far more than the size of our problems,
our own efforts, or even the challenges we face in life.

Though sometimes we forget, doubt or choose to ignore,
the truth is, God has promised to provide all that is needed
to accomplish well whatever it is that God wants us to do.

We may think that we're too unskilled or busy, or too old and weary,
but we all have been given something useful that we can offer,
that when given and entrusted to Christ becomes an abundance.

**I think we are all called to be disciples, called to serve the bread
and not to just sit comfortably on the grass and watch the others.**

This passage is all about the Gospel message of joyful hope
that God's grace and mercy come in limitless abundance,
and that there is cause for gratitude and celebration,
a hope & assurance we can trust, that we're not on our own.

**So in this miracle story or living parable, Jesus uses
the situation and the young boy to teach and demonstrate
that truth about God's power, purpose and promises.**

The critical issue is not about the size or hunger of the crowd.
It didn't matter how little money they had to buy food,
or that the boy's lunch was too small to make any difference.

The deciding factor was God's grace and provision, by which

everyone was fed to their full satisfaction in abundance,
even gathering another 12 baskets of food in excess.

As Christians,

sometimes we too feel lost & defined by the problems around us.

At times we do struggle with disappointment, challenges and defeat,
and we can feel overwhelmed, beaten or hopeless in our situation.

And quite accurately, realistically and rightly we recognize
that we cannot solve or resolve all the world's problems,
and we do not have all the answers or resources we need,
but by God's grace & good purpose, that's not the final word.

Though we can't do it all,
and sometimes our efforts may seem ridiculously inconsequential,
yet that does not mean that we cannot do something meaningful,
or that the little we can do does not make a real difference.

**From the young boy who freely offered Jesus his small lunch,
we learn that even the smallest of contributions are
significant from a life that is surrendered to the Lord.**

Though it seemed that
the problem was too big and the boy had nothing much to offer,
yet as it turns out, what he gave to Jesus became
the building material that Christ blessed into a miracle...
and so the seemingly insignificant became an abundance in excess.

**The message of this story is about what can happen
when we place ourselves, our lives in the hands of God to use
and be put to work whatever we have and are willing to offer.**

We see the size of the need, focus on the resources we are lacking,
and let our fear of scarcity do our calculations, which then
can overwhelm, direct or limit our faith and trust in God,
making us afraid to step out in faith and use even the little we have.

During WWII, when sugar was scarce and being tightly rationed,
a man at a lunch counter demanded more sugar for his coffee,
to which the waitress replied,
"Just stir what you've already got."

"Just stir what you've already got",
is our call is to be faithful with that which we've already got,
trusting in the Lord's promised provision of abundance
to provide all that is needed to accomplish God's purpose.

In the Bible, important truths are often repeated.

In the Gospels, Jesus reminds us four separate times,

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

(Mat 19:26, Mar 10:27, Luk 1:37, 18:27)

Our call is to not focus on the size or difficulty of the task,
and not to focus on limitations or the things we do not have,
but rather, let us fully embrace what the Lord gives us to do,
grateful for resources and opportunities as God provides.

The text challenges us both as individuals and as a church,
do we really live, do we trust that God does provide as promised
everything that's needed to do the ministry that God wants done?

... or by our fear and calculations are we restricting and limiting,
or supposing our contributions, are too insignificant to matter?

Jesus fed a hungry crowd of 5000 all that they wanted to eat
with just a boy's lunch of few small barley loaves and fish,
when they were willingly offered for the Lord to use.

So as God's own people, recipients of God's gracious love and Spirit,
**is my focus more on possible problems and limited resources,
or on what God might accomplish in me, with me and through me?**

What more could the Lord possibly do right here at 1st Presbyterian,
if we each trusted, gave and committed **our all** into the hands of God?

As Jesus promised and explained in John 10:10,
I have come that you may have life, **and have it abundantly.**

And as Paul assures us in Ephesians 3:20-21,

... to him who by **the power at work within us** 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. Amen.