

John 6:1-15

Synod of ELCSA(NT) 2013

Piet Retief

Dear congregation

It hasn't happened once, it hasn't even happened twice only that I brought home some unexpected guests for a meal and invited them to stay over in our home. I met them, I talked to them and then invited them. As easy as that.

It hasn't happened once, it hasn't even happened twice only that my wife almost got a heart attack because of these unexpected guests, rebuking me: "You know, that we have got nothing in our home. The pantry and the fridge are empty. How can you do that to me?"

It hasn't happened once, it hasn't even happened twice only, that my wife performed this incredible miracle of putting a marvellous meal on to the table created from - well, obviously nothing, because that's what she said. **Nothing - this I learned rather quickly - has quite a variety of meanings.**

When I still worked in Midrand I once took two German exchange students with me on a home-visit to this informal settlement with its cynically beautiful name "Ivory Park." After our visit with this one family the German students were totally shocked: "These people have nothing" - they said. And yet, we sat under a roof of corrugated iron, and on a chair, and we were heartily welcomed with a nice cup of tea. **Nothing - my learning experience continued - has quite a variety of meanings; and so have the words "enough", "more than enough", "enough is enough" - and obviously this English proverb that "enough is as good as a feast", which according to my Thesaurus means that "moderation is more satisfying than excess."**

I have my doubts though, whether the students I teach in Hermannsburg, will agree with this "enough is as good as a feast"-story at all. I somehow think that many of them dream of their time beyond the boundaries of school, when they will earn big bucks, spend big bucks, and where they will have plenty of feasts and parties with much, much more than enough.

Why should we be moderate - they will ask - if we can have it all?

Yes, they are typical children of our times - they were raised by you and by me.

Three rather varied experiences that prompt me to read to you a famous passage from John 6. In fact, the story that I want to read to you is so illustrious, that for once all 4 gospel authors agreed to include it in their message:

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were

seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Can we blame the crowd that surrounded Jesus for wanting to crown him the King of Bread? The closest we have come to this is by introducing Burger King to our franchise market, after we have had King Pie out there already for some years. But somehow they fail to do, what the King of Bread was expected to do: Multiply bread. Multiply bread - not only until everyone has had enough, no, more than enough.

- Twelve extra baskets of more-than-enough.
- Enough to fill every tribe of God's people.
- One basket of more-than-enough for every disciple, after the crowds had eaten as well.

The King of Bread was able to do what noone else ever achieved - providing to the masses food, basic, essential nourishment at an affordable price, indeed, for free.

The statistics of hunger in the times of Jesus must have been bad - but they are peanuts in comparison to the statistics of hunger in our day and age and in our world. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that nearly 870 million people of the 7.1 billion people in the world, or one in eight, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in the years 2010-2012. Almost all the hungry people, 852 million, live in developing countries. There are 16 million people undernourished in developed countries.

- It argues that poverty is the principal cause of hunger.
- It argues that harmful economic systems are the principal cause of poverty and hunger.
- It argues that conflict is a major cause of hunger and poverty. Imagine, for the price of one missile, a school full of hungry children could eat lunch every day for 5 years.
- It argues that hunger is also a cause of poverty, and thus of hunger. Also: Ein Teufelskreis - im wahrsten Sinne dieses Wortes!
- It also argues that the number of suffering are increasing dramatically because of changes in our environments caused by climate change. It argues that global warming causes 300,000 deaths a year.
- Indeed, malnutrition is implicated in more than half of all child deaths worldwide - a proportion unmatched by any infectious disease since the times of Black Death.

We need a Bread King. There is no question about it. The people in Jesus' times were spot on. We need someone who can make all the difference. We need a performer of miracles. We need Jesus, who a little later in this same chapter says of himself: *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and*

whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Reminds me of this ditty we sang in my youth: “Jesus is the answer for the world today, without him there is no answer, Jesus is the way.”

Yet, as we can envisage Jesus as the answer not only to our spiritual needs, but our bread-needs as well, as we envisage Jesus as the answer to our world’s manifold problems, **we should be careful not to overlook the question**, we should be careful not to miss the all important question that is asked in this fabulous story. Remember, the question of Andrew, Peter’s brother? *“Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”*

The miracle of the more-than-enough-bread,
the miracle of the King of Bread,

the miracle of feeding the multitudes in a cost-effective, affordable and astonishing manner **starts with an unknown and unnamed boy sharing everything he had:** Not only 5 loaves of bread, no, five “small” barley loaves and two “small” fish - we read.

“How far will they go among so many?” A most logical question. A most practical question. A question of simple economics that needs to be asked time and again as we consider the resources of our world and their inequitable distribution.

And Jesus replies in what he does:

How far will this go? It will go all the way.

What will go all the way?

We need to be very clear about that.

Its not about the loaves and the fish, in fact, the story line impressed on us how little and small these offerings were - **BUT: It is all about the sharing.** This bread-miracle is not some kind of wizardry with loaves of bread emanating from the hat of the great magician!

Enough - more than enough - enough for this feast becomes possible, because one out of many was willing to give all he had.

This story of the designated King of Bread, who refuses to become and be the King of Bread, becomes more **critical and challenging** every time I read it. One of the key-words of our day and age is the “standard of living.”

- We need a good standard of living,
 - we need to improve our standard of living,
 - we are appalled by the poor’s standard of living -
- and the prophets of this “standard-of-living-god” are the advertisements that so rudely interrupt our movies on TV.

Constantly they suggest to us that more is better, and the better it gets the more it becomes.

Never do they ask us when enough is enough.

Never do they ask how much we really need in order to live comfortably.

Never do they encourage us to share.

Charles Birch, a famous Australian ecologist once said: *“The rich must live more simply that the poor may simply live.”*

Five small bread and 2 small fishes were the point of departure in this Biblical story. That wasn’t really worth mentioning in the bigger picture of our global needs, and

yet: **It made all the difference - all the difference in the world.**

Where and what are the loaves and fish that we are going to share

- for the hungry to eat,
- for the naked to be clothed,
- for the uneducated to be trained,
- for the homeless to find shelter?

Where and what are our small contributions - as individuals, as congregations, as church - that will make all the difference in the world?

Where and what resources can we actually share with one another - farmers amongst farmers, congregations amongst congregations, schools amongst schools - shared resources that will in this way free up resources for others to have as well?

Sharing - we need to contemplate sharing in all its various shades and possibilities for us to effectively have 5 small loaves and 2 small fish in our hands:

- Ready for distribution.
- Ready for consumption.
- Ready for multiplication.
- And then this Biblical promise: Then there will be more than enough. Enough for another day, another need, another feast.

Enough is as good as a feast - and what a glorious feast it was indeed?

Everyone got what they needed - and there was still plenty left.

Jesus is the answer - indeed, he is - and he starts to answer our questions and address our needs as we become willing to give what we have for everyone to receive.

Amen