

Proper 12 B
Sermon for All Ages
John 6:1-14
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And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When 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?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰Jesus 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. ¹¹Then 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. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When 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.”

This really is a great story, isn't it? The whole scene is just so vivid, so real: thousands of people sitting on the verdant hillsides as the sun begins to dip below the horizon; tummies begin to rumble among the crowd; Philip suddenly becomes aware of their very human needs. "Master," he says, "it's late and the people are hungry. You should send them home." In a somewhat aloof and unconcerned way, Jesus responds, "Just feed them." In the grown-up version of the story from the New Revised Standard Version, Philip quips back to Jesus that 6-months wages wouldn't buy enough for the whole crowd to even get a bite!

Then, a little boy comes forward with 5 small loaves and 2 small fish and that's where the story gets interesting. Jesus blesses the food and then the disciples pass it out. Miraculously, there's enough to feed the whole crowd, with food leftover!

The classic liberal interpretation of this story goes something like this: the little boy's generous sharing inspired the crowd and they all took out their own lunch boxes and began to share. And when everyone finally shared what they had, there was more than enough to go around.

I like this interpretation. I appreciate the way that it reminds us that there really is enough. We so often get caught up in the narrative of scarcity that we hoard for ourselves and forget about others. This interpretation puts the oneness on people who, following the boy's example, share with one another. After all, it's this kind of mutual concern and common care that is meant to characterize heaven's realm among us, isn't it?

I also like that it's a child who shows the people what it looks like to give selflessly. Kids are really good at that. In fact, a study done last year by the University of Washington shows that even infants at 19 months of age are capable of truly altruistic behavior. In the study, a piece of fruit was placed before hungry infants. In the instances where the researchers

pretended to accidentally drop the fruit and attempt to retrieve it for themselves, more than half of the hungry infants picked up the fruit and gave it to the researcher!¹ Ignoring their own needs, children, even infants, are capable of doing something that adults often struggle with—being altruistic and giving with no thought of receiving.

There’s a classic line from the prophet Isaiah that’s often quoted in instances where children model this sort of beatific behavior. The prophet details their vision of a hoped-for future when wild and domestic animals and people all dwell together in peace and they say: “And a little child shall lead them.” Truth be told, there is far worse than being led by the likes of ones so capable of selflessness.

Psychologist Michael Tomasello states that young children “have an almost reflexive desire to help, inform and share. And they do so without expectation or desire for reward.”² It’s through socialization that children learn, he says, “to be selective about whom to help, inform and share with, and they also learn to manage the impression they are making on others—their public reputation and self—as a way of influencing the actions of those others toward themselves.”³

It’s almost as if experience squeezes the altruism right out of us. It should be no surprise, then, that Jesus is so often portrayed by the gospel authors with children, even saying things like, “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” Viewed this way, children provide us a glimpse back into the future that could have been with each of us, had experience and learned cynicism not driven it out of us.

¹ “Toddlers Capable of Selfless Behavior: Study,” Aninews.com, February 4, 2020, <https://www.aninews.in/news/lifestyle/parenting/toddlers-capable-of-selfless-behavior-study20200204190749/>.

² Adam Gorlick. “For kids, altruism comes naturally, psychologist says,” News.stanford.edu, November 5, 2008, <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2008/november5/tanner-110508.html>.

³ Ibid.

The little boy with the 5 loaves and 2 fish could have been any one of us. And it still can. Rather than the me-first approach to life that we're socialized into, we can choose to return to the others-first posture of childhood. We can choose to prioritize the needs of struggling communities over our own. We can choose to give of ourselves for the good of all.

This story is a powerful testament to the power of generosity, altruism, and selflessness. It's a parable for what can happen if we decide to give of ourselves. 5,000 people go away full. Just imagine what we could do if we had a mind to. The truth is, we did have a mind to perform such acts of altruism and generosity when we were younger. Today, may the little children lead us back into a better version of ourselves, for the sake of our world. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Morning has indeed broken, O God, and with it a new day—fresh with possibility. Sometimes we forget just how freeing it can be to wake up, to greet the morning, to start over anew, with no mistakes. Sometimes we forget that the day that unfolds is filled with choices that will lead us down a path toward satisfaction, health, and wholeness for ourselves and others or down a path toward cynicism, inaction, selfishness, or unhappiness.

How easy it is to believe that our days and our lives simply happen to us—that we are merely the passive recipients of the good or ill of the cosmos. How easy it is to fool ourselves into thinking that others are responsible for our happiness or discontent. And how willingly we sometimes relinquish the power to choose our fate.

May we remember that with a new morning, comes fresh possibility; that the day is not already written in some heavenly book; that it unfolds organically with us. May we remember that while we may not choose every aspect of its unfolding, we do choose how we will respond.

May gratitude and grace, optimism and opportunity, generosity and gentleness characterize our response to the myriad events that unfold as the sun charts its course across the sky. May we make the most of this and all our days, even as Jesus did, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father/Mother/Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.