NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Abundant Presence”* John 6:1-21

**Today’s story about Jesus is, I believe, the most beloved story we have of him. I say this because, aside from the crucifixion and the resurrection, it is the only story that is repeated in all four of the gospels. It is a story that tells us that wherever Christ enters in, abundance and plenty come with him; people are fed; no one is left out or left without.**

**I believe this story is remembered and recorded by all four gospel writers because it is so satisfying to the human heart and soul. It is also satisfying to our own bodies to think of hunger pains being relieved, even eliminated. The gospel writers could feel this story in their bodies and we can feel it in ours, that sense of well-being after having eaten, and eaten enough to be satisfied.**

**So, this story has been beloved through the ages because we know what it is like to be fed, and to believe that we always will be fed; and because it brings us peace to believe that this will always be true for us, our families, and friends.**

**Having said that, I must admit that I have a problem with my own summary. I do not have a problem with the truthfulness—I believe, with all my heart, that this is true: that when Christ enters in, abundance *does* come with him, people *are* fed and satisfied.**

**What bothers me are the number of hungry people in the world. We have known the story of Christ for more than 2,000 years—why it still so, why is there still hunger?**

**But that is not all. We also know that there is—right now, in this moment—there *is* enough food to feed every hungry person on this planet. This has been true for quite some years now. *Every hungry man, woman, and child could be fed and filled right now, today*. And yet we know that this has not happened. It has not happened on a global, national, or even a local scale—there are hungry children and adults even here in our own community.**

**How is this possible?**

**The gospel does not really tell us *how* this is possible—it does not have to. It does, however, tell us *why*.**

**Jesus sees the people hungry and tired and he wants to feed them. The disciples see the *number* of hungry people and they want to send them away to fend for themselves.**

**The disciples see the situation in terms of what they do *not* have. They do not have enough for each person to even have a little. They do not have enough money to go and purchase enough to feed even a meaningful *fraction* of the crowd.**

The disciples were openly fearful about the scarcity of the situation. They see thousands of people and no food. They see what is *not* there: there are no vendors; there are no marketplaces to get food in the deserted place they are in. The *lack* of all these things puts the disciples into a mild panic. What on earth were *they* to *do* in such a situation?

The disciples’ panic is a very understandable *human* response to the situation. They become overwhelmed. They only see what they do *not* have and they assume that this is the whole story.

This happens all the time, to a lot of us, perhaps all of us. All I know is it has happened to me. Not too long ago, I was in the same spot as the disciples, only it was on Kauai. Calvin probably remembers this evening. It was just a few years ago. It was the year of the UCC’s Western Regional Youth Event. Kapaa UCC had agreed to host the Association-wide fundraiser to send all of the youth who wanted to go to the event that summer.

The father of two of the youth in our church had agreed to oversee the meal. He was going to take care of it all himself. While I was glad, I was also a little apprehensive, as his wife was not going to help because she had to work this evening. Yes, I do know how sexist that is, that I assumed that because it was the husband, he would need his wife to help him.

As the event day approached, I kept checking in with him. Was he sure he was going to have enough time, enough help, enough food? He said he was, but when he told me he was going to bake chickens in the church kitchen, I (strongly) suggested he opt for something a bit easier to manage—spaghetti and meat sauce. He agreed and I was relieved until—on the afternoon before the event—he showed me how much he had purchased for the evening.

It did not look like enough, but at that point, there was nothing I could do except pray…and worry…which I did quite a lot of both. I also did not go through the food line for dinner that evening—somehow I thought that would help. What did not help my nerves was that a huge crowd from all over the island came to us that evening. It also did not help my nerves that I had a group of friends visiting that evening—a woman named Terri, who is a pastor in the Metropolitan Community Church, with whom I had gone to seminary. She and her wife and two other couples had come to the event to support the kids, and me.

Instead of being grateful, I was mortified that they had come. I was mortified that they had come while on vacation, had made a donation, had bought something from the auction, but had *not* been fed well.

I kept thanking them profusely. I also confided in Terri my fears about there not being enough food to go around. Terri just laughed, actually she laughed at me, and then she reminded me that she and her friends had come to help a group of kids go to a church event we all hoped would strengthen their faith. For her and the rest of their group, that was reason enough to have had a great time, which they did.

She also made the observation that all the people who went through the food line were also there for the same reason, and she said she surmised that because of this they were also mindful of each other, and each others’ needs, and that because they all began with a spirit of fellowship and generosity, she surmised that each person could see what was available, and that this had an effect on how they filled their plate.

Everyone did eat that evening, and we ended up raising enough to fund all of the expenses for all nine youth who went to that event.

As I said earlier, the bible tells us *why* the people are not fed. It is not because there is not enough. It happens because we are often *not* mindful enough of others’ needs. We try to be, but we get overwhelmed with the size of the problem. It is because we are not able to see the abundance with which God continues to fill the earth.

It is like when we feel threatened with bad weather and begin buying up huge quantities of toilet paper. We become afraid there will not be any more toilet paper to be had, ever again. Our fears might be relieved if we could physically *see* the warehouses full of the stuff. It is all there…it is just waiting to be distributed—and that is the real problem when it comes to hunger. It is not a quantity problem. It is a distribution problem. It is a failure of sight problem—our sight, our insight.

What Jesus brought to the human situation in this story was his own sight—he *saw* the abundance. He, himself was and *is* the abundance, and our good news is that he has given that abundance—which is himself—to all of us so that we need not ever be without again.

What I mean is this: we have been given the sight to *see* and experience God’s abundance. It is Christ’s presence in our own lives that assures us there *is* enough.

If there are still hungry people in the world—and we *know* there are—it is not because there is not enough. It is because too many among us still cling to our own vision instead of seeing the abundance that is Christ, and his desire that we find loving and equitable ways to distribute that abundance—the way he distributed the bread and fish with his own hands.

And seeing the master offering the bread and fish—as he, himself did—moving among the multitudes, they knew they would receive a share that would be enough. They knew they had been seen. They saw that he was mindful, even caring of their needs, and that he was prepared to give all that he had to feed them. And perhaps, in seeing all of this, they found themselves emulating him, bringing out and sharing what they had brought, too, but had thought to keep to themselves. Perhaps this is what they did so there was enough.

Jesus confidently walks forward into a seemingly hopeless situation and gives all that there is without hesitation. This pouring out of all there is, and is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will continue to do throughout the gospel. He will give of himself in mind, spirit, and body. He will pour out his blood and give of his body so that we might be reminded that there is abundance.

And maybe *that* is our lesson for today: that we may not be able to see all there is, we, ourselves, may not be able to see all there is, but we can be mindful and aware of one another and one another’s needs. We may not—by ourselves, or even this congregation—we may *not* all my ourselves have enough to feed all the hungry people of the world, but our good news is that we can give as much as we can.

We can and should do as much as we can. We can and should be willing to give all we can, but most importantly, we should remember that the abundance that is Christ has already been given to us, and because of that, there is going to be a day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none. It may also mean that we are to be like the disciples who collect what is left over so that nothing may be lost. Not collecting to hoard or overindulge ourselves, but so that the abundance can continue to be shared and celebrated amongst all the people.

On this day of many blessings of Christmas in July, I thank you for all that you have already given. I thank you for receiving and sharing the abundance, which is Christ. And I pray that this will be a reality for us, and with more and more people as we continue our journey with Christ. Amen.