

August 22, 2021

John 6:56-69

Joshua 24: 1-2, 14-18

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A retired professor, Tom Fate, reflected on a phone conversation he had with his mother who was living in a care center during the pandemic. She didn't understand why he couldn't visit, so he called her daily:

"She lived in a fog of dementia," he wrote, "but it often thinned, letting more light through. 'I just don't seem to get much done anymore' my mother said.

'You're 95,' I replied, 'you don't have to get much done. Let people do stuff for you for a change.' She laughed at this. Then I asked what she had for dinner. She couldn't remember.

'Oh, nothing fancy,' she finally said. 'But it was a great plenty.'

A great plenty. The phrase meant, for her, 'there is always enough.' She applied it both to church potlucks and meals that had to stretch when times were hard."

A great plenty. If you've been following the Gospel readings from John over the last many Sundays, you know that we've heard Jesus' point to himself again and again as the Bread of Life. Back in July, our journey began with the feeding of the 5,000--gathered together in the middle of nowhere, Jesus takes 5 loaves and 2 fish, blesses, breaks and gives them to the crowd and everyone eats their fill, with leftovers to spare. Plenty.

This miracle starts a curious phenomenon--the crowds follow Jesus wherever he goes, because they assume that Jesus and the disciples are a traveling food truck. It's not so strange when you think about the life of these 1st century folks, which was a hand to mouth existence.

In response to their frantic following, in this entire chapter Jesus takes great care to invite people into relationship with him--to learn what it means to surrender, to stop holding so tightly to all of life, to trust what Jesus the Bread of Life can

provide: always *enough* mercy, *enough* love, *enough* promised presence. Jesus' body and blood *embodied* God, right in front of them.

The reaction wasn't overwhelming excitement, as we heard today: because of Jesus' words, many followers no longer followed. "This teaching is too difficult, who can accept it?" they said, walking away. How could what Jesus was saying be real?

This past week it seemed as if we were surrounded by a negative great deal of plenty: of sorrow, pain, and suffering. The people of Afghanistan, the people of Haiti, children's ICUs full, the West we love on fire...An unending litany of anguish. Add to that whatever burdens each of us are carrying these days and it is overwhelming. We long to be enfolded, to trust in the promised abundance of the Bread of Life; but so much gets in the way. Greed, callousness, anger, stupidity, fear, and honestly--all the ways we know *we* get in the way of the abundant life Jesus offers. I wonder if "Help!" might be the most common word we all shared in our prayers.

The people standing in front of Joshua in today's first scripture passage had prayed that very plea again and again. A whole generation had wandered in the wilderness, needing water, food, and protection. Over and over they absolutely refused to trust that God would care for them--and yet the full arc of the story tells how God would not give up on them, and how again and again God met their needs. Joshua manages to express a command, an invitation, and a profession of faith all rolled into one this morning, doesn't he: "*Choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*"

You might know that you can find this verse on all sorts of plaques and wall art, particularly at Hobby Lobby. In that context it can seem like a militant declaration of faith; even hearing it this morning it can sound like a one and done deal: Joshua said it first, the people followed his lead, and that was that--faithful and trusting forever.

In reality, the rest of the Hebrew Bible will tell the story of how well and also how poorly the people live out their fervent promise. They would need to be reminded--

need to remind themselves over and over--of all that God had done, all the *promises of God*. They needed to be reminded of the direction of those promises: flowing **first** toward them from God: the abundance of love, mercy, forgiveness and on and on--gifts that invited their response of faith and trust because of God's actions, not their own.

When Jesus tells us over and over "I am the Bread of Life," it is our invitation to reflect on the direction of Christ's promises to us: how we have each received love and mercy, hope and grace in our own lives.

How has this meal we share today sustained you in your journey? How have you been given the gift of companionship--friends and family who have walked alongside and been generously present? Can you think of moments when you were sure you did not have "enough"--enough strength, or hope, or patience, or faith, and yet God provided more than enough?

Jesus' heart of compassion entered into all of human life with an invitation to God's abundant love, love that could not be stopped and could not be killed. Since we receive that love again and again, we are *freed* to live abundantly, giving ourselves away--all we have and all we are--so that other people might experience abundant life.

Tom Fate concluded his reflection: "*Compassion is the quality I most admired in my mom. She knew it was what enabled the possibility of a great plenty, of there being enough for everyone. That's the world she lived toward, in small ways, in a small town, but with great love.*"

May that compassion and gratitude be ours as well.

