

June 3, 2018

**Every Broken Piece**  
John 6:1-14  
(Outdoor service in Owen Park)

Summer Prayer, by Karen T. Ebert

God, when we really let ourselves go, when we really let go,  
being with you feels like coasting down a hill,  
like swaying in a hammock,  
like ice cream melting down our chin.

Perhaps that is what heaven will be like –  
like relaxing into you, and ending our fevered racing.

Grant us, in these too-short months  
crammed with soccer balls, and vegetables to weed,  
with house paint and travel itineraries,  
permission to relax.

We need to taste the presence of heaven *now*.

In this green plateau of summer,  
we are closer than we will ever be at other times of the year-  
times that cause us to brace and flinch and hurry.

For this is the lush season,  
The season of exuberant growth and sky-high possibilities.

In this season, we might learn to trust.  
To trust that you will heal our wounds,  
and heal our world,  
and hold us tightly to your breast,  
and never let us go.

To trust that you know what you are doing,  
and that you want for us abundant joy.

God, this is the season of open hands,  
when you offer life so generously, extending open hands.

May it be the season we learn to relax *our* grip,  
open *our* hands,  
and let things slip in and out of *our* fingers,  
like sand and water at the beach.

We pray in the name of the one who knew when to work,  
and when to put the work aside,

and who taught us how to trust in you, by praying, **Our Father, 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 trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass  
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.**

\* \* \*

There's more to telling a story than just getting the facts straight. It also matters *how* we tell it. Even using the same basic story, different tellers can change that story's meaning by how they arrange the events and by what details they keep in or leave out. For instance, we Christians have a story. It is the story of how Jesus of Nazareth was not just a man but was in fact Eternal God, taking on our flesh and living among us, dying among us, and then rising again, so as to restore humanity's relationship with God. That's a good story, and because we believe it is a story that actually happened, we call it *The Good Story* – or, in Old English, “the gospel.” But not everyone tells this good story the same way. Some reduce the gospel to a few proof-texted bullet points and, although they keep the basic facts, manage to communicate something like: *You have to believe exactly as I do, or God will torture you in hell forever.* Which is a completely different story. Not a good story. Not a story at all, but a threat. Me, I prefer the gospel.

Usually, though, variations on a story aren't quite that dramatic. Take, for instance, the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. All four of the Gospels – the books that tell the good story of Jesus – recount that story, but each one modifies the details to tell it slightly differently, with a different purpose. Today I want to look at the version told in the last of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John. I read John 6:1-14:

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

Now, if you spent any time at all in Sunday School as a child, you've heard this story. So instead of going over the basic plot – which is the same in all four tellings of it in the New Testament – I want to take just a minute to point out some ways that John shaped this story for his own unique purposes. Because there are certain details that are only found in John's version.

For instance, only John names specific disciples and describes their different responses to Jesus. When Jesus sees the crowd, he tells his disciple Philip that they should buy food for them. Philip replies, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ Now, notice what Philip did there. He looked out at the crowd and estimated their number: 5000. Then he estimated how much bread it would take for each one of them to have “a little.” Not a full meal, mind you. Just a little. Then he took that amount of bread and multiplied it by 5000 to get the total volume of bread that would be required, which he then multiplied by current

retail cost. Then, to make his point, he divided that total cost into the average annual wage for a laborer to determine that feeding all these people a snack would cost six months' wages. And he did all that in his head before replying to Jesus.

There's one in every group, isn't there? Nothing against that, mind you. We need them. They're the only ones who can figure out how to split the check at Applebee's. In fact, if you're one of those people, come speak to me after the service about serving on our Finance Committee. Nevertheless, as much as we need numbers people, the numbers only led Philip to conclude that feeding the crowd was impossible.

Then there was Andrew. After Philip had crunched the numbers, Andrew brought the little boy with the five loaves and two fish to Jesus. But then he added, *But what are they among so many people?* So maybe Andrew didn't think it was *impossible* to feed 5000, but he definitely thought it was unlikely.

That leads us to the boy. John's account of this feeding is the only one that mentions that the loaves and fish were the willing gift of a small outsider – not one of Jesus' disciples, who were busy adding up dollars and probabilities, but a child. He didn't know what Jesus could do, but he was willing to do his part. "Here. Take what I have." When you remember that none of the other Gospels mention the boy, you know that John must have had a specific reason for pointing him out. Apparently, John wanted to remind us that the miracles of God are not the result of official insiders working through plans and budgets. Instead, God's miracles take place when anyone – *anyone*, no matter how insignificant – gives God what he or she has and trusts God to use it.

Here's another interesting variation in John's account of this miracle. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say that the disciples "took up" the leftover pieces of bread. But John uses a different word. He has Jesus say, "*Gather up every broken piece, so that not one should be lost.*" Now I may be stretching here, but the Greek word for "gather" that John uses is *synagogein*, which is the word often used for gathering people into a congregation – a synagogue. There is even an early Communion prayer from the second century that says, "As your bread was *synagogued* in the hills, so may your Church be *synagogued* from the world" (*Didache* 9,4). If this was intentional in John, it adds a new layer of meaning to Jesus' command: "Gather up all the broken pieces, so that not one is lost." Jesus' work is for the sake of everyone. Not just the insiders. Not just the healthy. Not just the well-adjusted. Everyone. Every broken piece is to be gathered.

One final note from John's version of this story – one more thing that only John mentions: this miracle takes place at Passover time. Now Passover is the Jewish festival dedicated to remembering how God saved the people from Egypt in the Exodus. To this day, every year, Jewish families gather in their homes for this sacred meal, involving a week of preparation and the breaking of bread. Again, John's calendar notation has to be intentional – he is connecting the bread of this miracle with the Passover bread that represents God's salvation.

But notice this: notice how this meal with the 5000 is different from the Passover tradition that the people would have known. The Passover is celebrated in a small, intimate group in a home – often just one family. This meal is celebrated out in the fields, with crowds of people gathered from who knows where, all seated on the grass. Everyone was welcome. Moreover, whereas there are standards of holiness to be met before one is permitted to partake of

the Passover, here in the grassy fields, everyone who was hungry was invited to eat. No one was excluded. And so they celebrated a different Passover: an open Passover offering God's salvation to all. And every broken piece was gathered in.

We Christians, we who seek to follow the example and accept the healing of Jesus the Christ, also have a meal of remembrance. We call it Communion, or the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, and when we gather for this meal, we remember that "good story" – that gospel – that I mentioned earlier. We remember that Jesus became one of us, even to the point of sharing the fate of all flesh and dying. We remember that Jesus overcame death by rising again, and we give thanks.

Now Christians approach this meal differently. For some, this is an exclusive meal, for the few who have earned a place at the table by some means. For us Methodists, this is a meal that represents Christ's salvation for all people – not just insiders with standing, but also outsiders like that boy who wanted to share his meal if Jesus wanted it. This is a meal for anyone who is hungry, so everyone gathered here in this grassy place is welcome to take part in the meal.

As we begin this meal, we remember that on the night when Jesus gave himself up for us, at a Passover meal with his disciples, he took bread and broke it. Then he gave it to his disciples and said, "This is my body. Eat it, and while you eat it – and whenever you eat it in the future – remember me."

Then he took a cup of wine, held it up and said, "This cup is a new covenant, not like the old one, founded on the blood of sacrifices, but based on the blood of just one sacrifice. This is the new covenant in my blood. Drink it. All of you. And remember me."