



Good morning.

Let me begin with a question: Have you ever had an experience which completely changed your understanding and perspective on things?

I've heard a lot of stories like this over the years from all of you. Like a motor vehicle accident that no one ever should have walked away from... and yet, here you stand, on the side of road, and all you hear are the birds singing... and the crunch of gravel underneath your feet, and everything seems alive and brilliant and beautiful? Or that moment you first held your newborn child in your arms, and suddenly, all the past mistakes in your life seem far away, and the future is new, and bright, and you feel... really transformed.

I had one of those moments back in 2005 when I awoke out of a coma after an illness. I was bursting with love and with the knowledge of a second chance that is pure Grace – unearned, unexpected, like a gift, simple and pure.

I had another of those moments last Tuesday, which I want to share with you.

But first, let me acknowledge that it is always my practice to begin with the Gospel. Today. It's the famous scene of the crowd gathered around Jesus, and we see Jesus taking a few simple barley loaves and fish, blessing, breaking, and giving. The crowd begins in a place of scarcity and individualism, but as the blessed loaves and fish are passed among the crowd, something transformative happens to them all. More is put into the basket than is taken out. All are fed. A large gathering of individuals become members of one another, sharing what they have, and the baskets return to Jesus, not empty, but overflowing. The miracle is enacted in and through those who are gathered, and all is transformed by the mysterious holy grace and power of God.

I have a much longer version of my thoughts and reflections on this posted as the sermon text on the website, at www.GodsView.org. It is more in-depth than time allows for us this morning.

Here is the longer text:

[Let's look at the Gospel for today, because I believe that is a retelling of just such an experience for the disciples and for the crowd.

We enter the Gospel story today, with Jesus having been travelling about, healing and performing "signs" for the people.

Throughout this time, the crowds keep growing, following Jesus from place to place, and coming out to see him. Imagine yourself as having heard of this Jesus, and you have made the decision yourself to go out and hear him. When you get there, you find a great crowd, of men, women, and children.

Some had planned for this trip; some, perhaps, were on their way elsewhere, and were way-laid by the preaching of this Jesus of Nazareth...

Seeing the size of the crowd, Jesus asks Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? This succeeds in eliciting from Philip what is by now Philip's expected response, essentially that of "why, it can't be done!" In the world of Yes, No, and Maybe, Philip is clearly a "no." Andrew has a slightly better response, sort of a "Yes, But..." He points out the boy there that has five barley loaves and two fishes, **but** "what are they among so many?"

So Jesus instructs you to sit down with all the others. In the parallel passage in Luke 9:14, Jesus has everyone sit down in groups of fifty. To get an idea of the size of that, it means that we could fit two such groups into Waldron Hall, or about the number you might get at a church potluck dinner. Small enough so that you have a chance to see everyone there and interact with them in a meaningful way.

And Jesus takes the offering of a few loaves and some fish from a young boy, and it seems so little, so insufficient, so meager, and Jesus does the same four-fold action we repeat in the Eucharistic thanksgiving: He takes, gives thanks and blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them.

Now, do a little imagining with me... You are in a circle of fifty, and you look at the faces around you. Hidden in your daypack is a small portion of bread for the journey. This is not surprising – who ventures out into the countryside with absolutely on them, no provisions for the day? What women, of that day or of this, would venture out with their children without something hidden away with which to feed a hungry mouth? What woman or mother does not take account of these things?

But if you pulled out what little you have, it would neither be nearly enough for the circle of fifty, not to mention that would leave you with nothing at all.

But here's the dilemma - how do you take out what you have and eat it right in front of a circle of fifty, staring at you...

None of us has enough for fifty hungry people. We fear, so often, that we will not even have enough for ourselves, for the days to come.

And then there is the boy, who offers his few barley loaves and a few fish. Impossible. Chalk it up to the naïveté of a child... But baskets are going around... From circle to circle...

When it comes by the **first** time, you avert your eyes, and quickly hope it gets passed along to the next person next to you. Or you take it and move it along quickly. Perhaps you move your hand over the basket, in the suggestion that you dropped in some small amount of food. You see someone across from you take out something from his or her pack and place it in the basket.

Jesus is there, some distance away, but you can see him, giving thanks, breaking, offering...

The food still buried in your pack... You can feel its presence... You look at the faces – do they know you are holding out? Can they read what you are thinking in the lines on your face, the furrow on your brow? The look in your eyes?

You feel nervous and unsettled by this thought: annoyed; uncomfortable.

The baskets are coming by a **second** time – a few more people are placing things *into* the basket. Each person takes *out of* the basket a small piece of what is there for their own meal. Will there be enough? How could there be enough?

Or could there be enough? Before you thought clearly there would be nothing but scarcity, now you feel the first moments of doubt...

The boys, who has offered his barley loaves is beaming. He and Jesus are laughing. You untie the leather straps that bind your bag. A strange wonder comes over you... You rummage around as if you are looking for a piece of clothing... you find a strip of cloth with which to tie back your hair...

You can taste of the fish you have taken from one of the baskets. It troubles you that you have given nothing back, so your hand finds a small piece of bread from your daypack and you place it into the basket...

The crowd seems to relax. Or is it you? People in the circle are meeting one another's eyes... in some cases speaking to one another. They are beginning to share what they have.

The baskets come by a **third** time, and you pace all you have in it. It is a small but frightening step to take. What if I am hungry later on? What of my long trip home? Are others placing food into the baskets as well? Have they placed as much as you?

Doubts and suspicions make a final rally. How is it, that they had food *they* weren't sharing? We're they holding out as you were? Were they, too, frightened about tomorrow, about the future, about the journey ahead? Afraid of going without? Afraid there would not be enough? Were they too afraid that they would have no one to depend upon, that they would have to "go it alone, "and depend only on what little they had, with nothing to share or to spare...

Across the circle, you catch an older woman's eye... she seems caught in a moment of doubt, of insecurity, of fear, and then something is released, and she breaks into a wide smile of joy.

You hope the basket comes by a **fourth time**, and when it does, you place everything you have left in it. The basket, this time around, is more than three-quarters full, and everyone is taking from it as much as they need. You take of some olives, and a bit more of fish...

Somehow, this circle has become kin, in a strange and wondrous way. You wonder how other circles are doing, and you hear the sounds of laughing and conversation. Two disciples of Jesus come by. They are lugging baskets, which are now overflowing.

How can this be? Who is this man, in whose presence the crowd of strangers have become family, brothers and sisters and cousins? What has become of the seven barley loaves and few small fish?

What has become of our hearts, fearful and alone, now awash in celebration of our abundance and generosity? What is this joy in my heart and whose song is this upon my lips?

Everything looks different now. Just hours ago, you came to this place: tired, cold, and suspicious of those in the crowd around you. And now this... ...newness!]

This concludes the longer portion of the text:

As was saying at the beginning, I had an experience similar to that this week. I've had a lot on my heart and mind lately. How to re-open our buildings safely, how to welcome people again into in-person worship. I have heard from so many of you – and you are all in different places emotionally. Some are discouraged that we have not been meeting in person long before this. Some are frightened, and horrified by the idea that anyone from the church is meeting together at all with COVID rates rising again. People long for community, and are unhappy with the ways things have been, and are.

We have a kitchen remodel project underway. But there are delays, contractor delays, equipment shortages, long back-orders on materials, construction prices rising each month, and a bazaar team, and so many others, who desperately want to be able to get back to work, crafting jams and jellies and a multitude of good things, all to be sold for the benefit of those in need.

And I've been carrying all this each day for many months. It felt heavy, and I have been discouraged.

And then it all changed in a day. At 5:30am last Tuesday, my cell phone buzzed, waking me out of a deep sleep. "This is Guardian Security, a disembodied voice intoned, and we have received a fire alarm from St. Mary's Church.

Instantly, I was awake. I hit the bedroom stairs at a run, still pulling my arms into my shirt. Within minutes, I was pulling into the church parking lot, behind the fifth of five large pieces of fire equipment. The main church doors were wide open. Alarms were blaring at an unbelievable volume, emergency strobe lights flashing in the darkness of the building. Four large hoses led into the building. Inside was thick with smoke and it was hard to see.

Outside the building, firefighters were spraying water on the flames at the side of Waldron Hall, and on the walk-bridge. Police cars arrived out nowhere. My heart was pounding in my chest.

Later that day, as we reviewed the security camera, we could clearly see an individual approach the building, and within a few minutes of their exit, we could see smoke drifting across the camera view. Someone had set fire near the building. The rest of the day was a blur of fire investigators, police, and a flurry of activity. I tossed and turned all that night, never getting more than a few minutes of sleep.

Early the next morning, as the sun was still rising over the Chugach mountains, I drove back up the Tudor-side driveway. The tall Sitka spruce trees that line the drive seemed to say "welcome," a sunflower in a planter peered at me, inquisitively.

The Thomas Center was still asleep, our elders tucked in the dreams. The sun reflected off the greenhouse panels, brilliant and beautiful. The leaves of the Deborah maple on the church front lawn glistened hues of amber and red and green with the morning dew. Everywhere the birds were singing, like a symphony of God's glory. The peonies smiled in greeting.

The campus looked like the most beautiful place on earth.

Inside the sanctuary, the acrid smell of a campfire was strong and stung my eyes, but I didn't seem to care. I ran my hands over the baptismal font, remembering the precious little ones I have held in my arms and baptized there. My fingers traced the outline of the altar, and I felt the curve of the wood.

I felt the presence in that moment of all those who have gone before us into that larger life with God – loved ones now having passed into the nearer presence of God. I thought of Betty Newman, who used to hand me a twenty-dollar bill for the offering, only to snatch it back, and stare me down, and say, “spend this wisely.” I thought of the love and labor that built this community and this sacred place.

The words of the fire captain from the day before came back to me. “The fire had reached into the interior of the wall, and was racing for the rafters when an exterior sprinkler head burst, spraying water and extinguishing the fire in the wall. “See how the fire was started directly under that sprinkler? If it had been anywhere else, or that sprinkler hadn't activated when it did, the fire would have been in the ceiling, and within five to seven minutes, you would have had a major structural fire in which you would likely have lost the building. At that hour, no one was up, and because the fire started outside the building, it would not have triggered the fire alarm system until far too late. You were incredibly lucky. Everything happened in just the right way. You dodged a major bullet here.”

“We were blessed,” I said, dazed by his words. He just laughed, “It's enough to make a believer of me,” he said.

I stood there in the sanctuary, letting the sun pour in. It didn't matter anymore, not at all, the exact sequence or timing of how we re-gathered the community in worship. Whether we were back in the building this week, next week, in a month, it didn't matter. I was overwhelmed by the reality and the gift: We still *had* a building. I flashed back to March 16th, 2006, when I stood on the sidewalk outside The Church of The Holy Trinity in Juneau as the firefighters poured water on the smoldering remains of what was once a grand and beautiful church. I had left Anchorage on a plane at the first reports of a devastating fire there, and four hours later, the burned-out skeleton was still smoking, the then-rector's wife leaning on my shoulder heaving unconsolably.

I walked to the St. Mary's kitchen, and heard the refrigerators humming. It no longer mattered that there were delays and cost increases. In time, we would have a wonderfully remodeled kitchen. In time, someone would be bent over the stove, stirring a big pot of what would eventually be crabapple jelly.

I felt a prayer rising from deep within me. A prayer of gratitude, a prayer of thankfulness, a prayer of blessing. I looked at the smoke marks around the West end doorframe, felt the water-soaked carpet beneath me, and yet I was filled with joy!

From scarcity to abundance. From worry to exultation. From a paucity of bread and a couple skinny fish to a feast of gratitude.

Sometimes you almost have to lose something to know how much it really means to you. Perhaps this time of separation will enable us all to see in new ways. I felt the tears rising in my eyes, and everything got blurry. And I laughed. I laughed at the wonderful in explainable presence of God.

In time, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Wherever we are going, friends, we'll get there in time, together... together... Amen.

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The Collect

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Scripture Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament: 2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come

from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?” Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.” Then David said to Uriah, “Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back.” So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die.”

Psalm 145:10-19

10 All your works praise you, O Lord, *
and your faithful servants bless you.

11 They make known the glory of your kingdom *
and speak of your power;

12 That the peoples may know of your power *
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom; *
your dominion endures throughout all ages.

14 The Lord is faithful in all his words *
and merciful in all his deeds.

15 The Lord upholds all those who fall; *
he lifts up those who are bowed down.

16 The eyes of all wait upon you, O Lord, *
and you give them their food in due season.

17 You open wide your hand *
and satisfy the needs of every living creature.

18 The Lord is righteous in all his ways *
and loving in all his works.

19 The Lord is near to those who call upon him, *
to all who call upon him faithfully.

The Epistle: Ephesians 3:14-21

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The Gospel: John 6:1-21

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

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.



Today's Playlist:

"The Gift"

These shoes have walked some strange streets
Stranger still to come
Sometimes the prayers of strangers
Are all that keeps them from
Trying to stay static
Something even death can't do
Everything is motion
To the motion be true

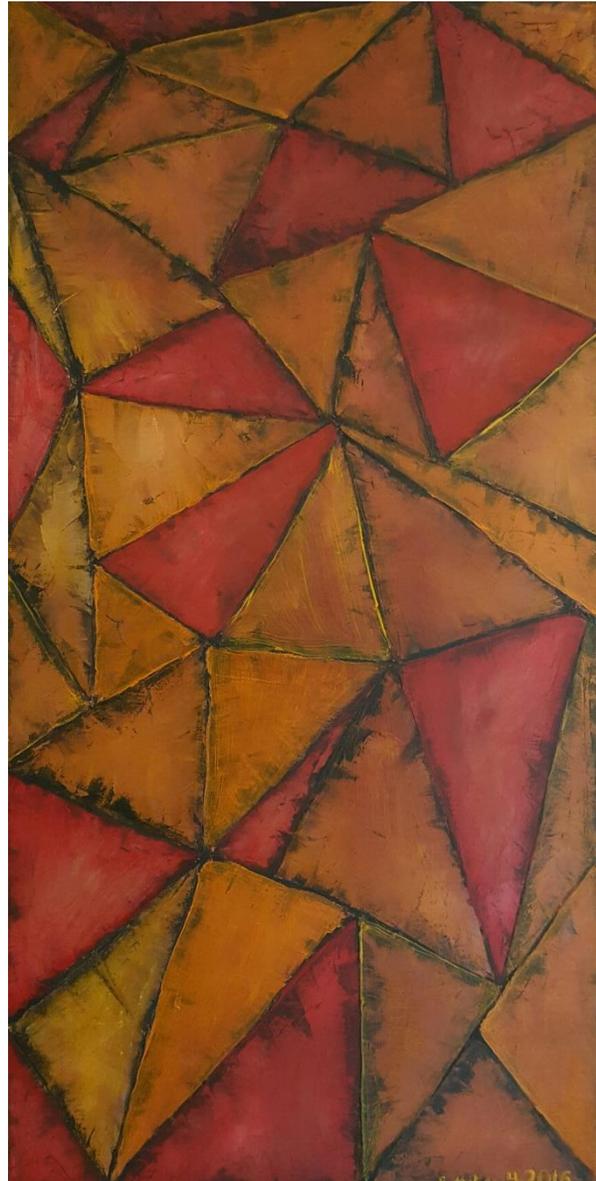
In this cold commodity culture
Where you lay your money down
It's hard to even notice
That all this earth is hallowed ground
Harder still to feel it
Basic as a breath
Love is stronger than darkness
Love is stronger than death

The gift
Keeps moving
Never know
Where it's going to land

You must stand
Back and let it
Keep on changing hands

Hackles rise in anger
Heat waves rise in sex
The gift moves on regardless
Tying this world to the next
May you never tire of waiting
Never feel that life is cheap
May your life be filled with light
Except for when you're trying to sleep

The gift
Keeps moving



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Never know
Where it's going to land
You must stand
Back and let it
Keep on changing hands

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