

ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
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2 Kings 4: 42-44 - Elisha feeds one hundred men

John 6: 1-21 - Acts of power

Ephesians 3: 14-21 - Words of blessing

To be honest with you, I don't really have a very clear idea of what I'm going to say today. That's not because there's not much to say. It's the opposite; there is so much to say. But as usual, I'll be aided by the scriptures which will help me narrow down to a couple of things what I'm going to say today. I have so much appreciation for the time I've been in ministry with all of you, and it's been a very rich and growing and supportive and healing time for me.

The scriptures suggest two ideas, two motifs. One is the feeding. The gospel story paralleled with the story from Kings speaks of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, and Paul's words from Ephesians are some of my favourite in the scriptures--those words of blessing and prayer "that you may be filled with the very fullness of God." As I said at the farewell held for me here at the end of June, the most important thing for me in the farewell was blessing--to leave you my blessing as I go, and to go with your blessing. And so we talk about feeding, this miraculous feeding that comes up again and again in scriptures. Of course we come here to be fed, don't we? We have times in our lives when we're hungering, when we're starving inside, and we come here to be fed, to feed on the word of God, and sacramentally to be fed at the table.

In the early years of my ministry I thought of ministry as feeding, and in a way it keeps coming back as an image for me. As a minister I have always felt somewhat torn between two different kinds of feeding--teaching and preaching--and what I'm actually doing there. The two different kinds of feeding show up for me in two images. One is the restaurant and the other is the cooking school. To some extent what we do as spiritual leaders, what we endeavour to do, is like a restaurant. This worship service, the Bible study, the sermon, whatever it is that we prepare as skilfully as we can, we offer to people. It's a bit like a chef in a restaurant who prepares a meal and lays it out before people, intending it to be both nourishing and nutritional, and enjoyable and attractive. And so it's a restaurant type of feeding to come here and share the word of God and present it in the most beautiful and nutritional way we can.

On the other hand, I've always felt a little uncomfortable about being the only one who knows how to cook, and feeling that people are dependent upon me and that I'm doing my ministry in a way that actually sustains that dependency. One of the greatest joys of ministry is learning how to cook--learning how to take those scriptures and the resources of the great theologians of history. As Bart said, taking the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other--only today it's the internet. With all that's going on in the world, the arts and the psychologists and philosophers present different windows on life. You take the riches of the tradition--the heritage, the theology, the scriptures--and you bring them together with insights into life and what is really going on in people's hearts and minds and guts of day-to-day living. You put all that together, and there is something comparable to that miracle of the loaves and fishes.

That process begins with something that looks like "Oh, what am I going to do with this." And then something emerges; the Spirit moves, sometimes conveniently on Thursday afternoon and I feel confident about going into my weekend. But sometimes I'm still waiting for that spark at nine o'clock Sunday morning. As a matter of fact, I've even gotten to the point at times in my ministry where I've thought I'll have to go into that pulpit with nothing. And I've thought: That

will teach me for waiting until Sunday; I'll learn and I'll quit putting myself through this torture. However, somehow the later I've left it the more powerful it is when it finally emerges. It's as if the Spirit has waited long enough to stop me from ruining it. So I've learned to trust the Spirit to do that. It's an exciting adventure! One of the things that comes to me from that exciting adventure is that I should share this with others. I shouldn't just give people the results; I should teach people how to cook--how to take those ingredients, prepare them, and do that creative thing and see the miracle of the Spirit moving in their own lives.

And so another part of ministry for me, as you've noticed in my style of preaching, is a kind of spiritual coaching--trying to show people how to engage, celebrate, step into, embrace, the spiritual presence and to feed themselves. There are, therefore, those two sides of ministry. It's not just one or the other; it's both. What a rich blend to be able to do that kind of listening and preparing, to have a wonderful group of people with open hearts and open minds and with whom to share that on Sunday morning, and at the same time to have people coming along on their spiritual journey and learning the craft of preparing and accessing the word of God.

That's part of the excitement of ministry. So as I leave you, my hope and my blessing is in part that you've been well fed, but even more than that, that you have learned how to feed one another and to feed yourselves. And through that whole paradox it's not either/or--it's not either someone else like a minister feeding you, or you feeding yourself--it's really Christ feeding us. It's really learning how to step into the presence of Christ, how to welcome Christ into our lives day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, and how to be fed the way Christ fed the people.

It wasn't just a unique thing; it was a reflection of the prophets, the prophetic dimension of who Christ is. But prophecy doesn't just mean predicting the future; rather, it means acting and speaking on behalf of the sacred. Elisha was one of the greatest prophets, a student of Elijah, and the story of that miraculous feeding is paralleled by the story of Christ's feeding. And so it's not just Jesus of Nazareth who lived for thirty years; it's the eternal Christ that is in each one of us. And by embracing that Christ, Christ feeds us--feeds us always and continually. It transforms the nature of ministerial leadership.

Mary Ann and I have had a wonderful team partnership because there's a bit of a dichotomy between the ordained and the diaconal. But it has been rich for me because I have a great deal of resonance with the diaconal philosophy of ministry. That philosophy is really enabling the people to be the ministers, to do ministry, to be the church themselves, so that is isn't just the minister doing ministry.

In that way, therefore, it's exciting for me to see the style of the interim year you are planning, a year in which the ministry of the whole people of God is going to be called forth as deeply and as richly as it can. And that works, that profoundly works, because it's not the minister who feeds us; it's Christ who feeds us. The gathered community--the faith fellowship--is there to be the body of Christ to one another, to be the presence of Christ, the body not just in the feeding sense but in the sense of the food itself as we celebrate in the sacrament Christ's body broken for us and blood shed for us. And so our souls are fed and we're filled. As Jesus says: "You drink that ordinary water and you'll be thirsty again; but you drink the living water that I give you and you'll never thirst again." We never thirst and we never hunger again as long as we're being fed by that Christ presence. We're filled, continually filled.

That's the beauty of those words from Ephesians. That passage from Ephesians is probably one of the passages I use most frequently as a scripture reading for weddings as I stand with that couple and all the beauty and energy of a wedding. Those words are so powerful, just to say to the couple "may you be filled with all the presence of God, may you be rooted and grounded in love." Those are words that I'm glad I celebrate being able to say to all of you today. May you be rooted and grounded in love, and may you be filled with all the fullness of God. Those words

are to me words of power, words of empowerment, for two young people who are being married--that joining together, the power of that joining together.

The wedding is a common image in the Bible, and it's also a common image in Jungian psychology as an archetype of the inner unity that we seek to achieve. It's really a psychological way of describing spiritual oneness, that coming together, that joining, that unifying within us. And so those are words of blessing for a church--that you be married to one another in this faith community. Your power is there in that unity as a faith community, the body of Christ, one and together and present in the world--the power of that oneness and, and in that oneness, married to Christ, filled with the very fullness of God.

Feeding and filling are perhaps two of the most important things, certainly what the Spirit has led me to share with you today on this final Sunday. So thank you all so much for the wonderful privilege of this pulpit, even though it has sometimes been only metaphorical. Thank you so much for the wonderful privilege of being able to share the word with you. For all of you in your lives individually as well as for your life as a congregation this year as you step into the challenges and the risks of a coming year, being filled with the presence of God will enable you to go anywhere, anywhere, even beyond safety, beyond the safe places. One of the most common metaphors in the Bible of that safe place is the dry ground, the shore. The vulnerable place is setting off from shore onto the lake or into the sea.

And so the story from the gospel this morning is of Christ who calls the disciples into the boat and into the sea to brave the storms and the waves, knowing that they're safe--safe in Christ. That's the call, and that's the call that is celebrated in this wonderful hymn that we are about to sing:

Jesus, you have come to the lakeshore
looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;
you only ask me to follow humbly.
O Jesus, with your eyes you have searched me,
while smiling, have spoken my name;
now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;
by your side I will seek other seas.¹

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

¹ Cesáreo Gabaráin 1979, trans. Gertrude C. Suppe, George Lockwood, Raquel Gutiérrez-Achón 1987. *Voices United* # 563.