

Never the Same Again

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Mark 6:30-44

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Confirmation Sunday

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Mark 6:30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. **31** He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. **32** And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. **33** Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. **34** As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. **35** When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; **36** send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." **37** But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" **38** And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." **39** Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. **40** So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. **41** Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. **42** And all ate and were filled; **43** and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. **44** Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.



It was Confirmation Sunday 1972 and an angelic seventh grade boy knelt at the altar rail of his church. He and the others had just answered the questions correctly, "I do ... I do ... I do ... I do." Now the pastor was making his way down the rail from one person to the next, and the boy felt his body begin to tremble. "I'm not going to make it through," he muttered to himself. "Why can't I

stop shaking? ... God, get me through this and I'll do anything you want ... Wait a minute ... Did I just say that out loud? ... Naw, just my imagination ... Why can't I stop shaking?" Pastor Fred approached and placed his hands on the boy's head.

"Those are some big hands," the boy thought, "I wonder if he can feel me shaking. Probably everyone can see me shaking. I wonder if anyone else is shaking. I don't dare look. Sure hope I don't pass out." The pressure on his freshly-cut and stiffly hair-sprayed hair was intense and the shaking wouldn't stop. Then it happened. The confirmation prayer, "James, (coincidentally that was the boy's name also) the Lord defend you with his heavenly grace and by his Spirit confirm you in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen." The shaking stopped as abruptly as it had started and the pastor moved on to the next confirmand.

Some of you might not remember your own confirmation – the day you joined your church – so I thought I would share the confirmation experience of one *anonymous* young man from some 38 years ago. He survived, I can assure you. He never did figure out what all that shaking was about, though. Maybe it was just nerves or maybe he was worried that the pastor would mess up his neatly coifed hair or it was a fear that at the last minute the pastor would decide to skip over his head since he barely passed his confirmation class final exam with a D.

Who knows? Certainly not the boy. He never did figure it out. But I can assure you from personal knowledge that that dashing, energetic, blue-eyed, dedicated, young man was confirmed as a member of that United Methodist church on that fine spring afternoon and he and the Church *have never been the same since*.

Another story. Not long ago, a bunch of people heard that a well-known sage (teacher) by the name of Jesus was coming to town. News spread quickly and a large crowd soon gathered to hear what he had to say. The size of the crowd was such that the teacher had to teach them out in the field and he had so much to say that they

all lost track of the time. Supper time rolled around and those closest to the teacher knew that the crowd was going to start getting hungry. "Let's send them away," some said, "You know how unruly a crowd gets when it gets hungry." "No," others said, "they came to hear our teacher and we should be responsible enough to give them supper." So they went to the teacher to get his advice.

"You give them something to eat," Jesus told the students. But students being some of the poorest creatures in all of God's creation said, "But where do we get the food? Bread and tuna salad for 5,000 people is gonna cost a lot of money. We don't have that kind of money!"

"How many loaves have you?," the teacher asked. They shrugged. "Go and see," he said.

They came back with 5 loaves and two fish. Not nearly enough for tuna sandwiches for everybody, but at least they had that.

"Separate the people into groups. Divide the food among the groups. Let's see what happens," said the teacher. And with a prayer, a traditional Jewish blessing perhaps, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the world, who causes bread to grow from the earth," the teacher broke the bread and the students took it to the groups scattered around the picnic grounds to see how much each one needed. They came back with considerably more than they started with, 12 baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish. *The students, the teacher, the crowd were never the same again* after that quiet afternoon on the green grass.

Two stories – a 20th century, 12 year old American boy being confirmed in his church and a 1st century, Jewish sage asking his students how many loaves they have. Confirmation and loaves. Loaves and confirmation. There's some connection, but what is it?

When that 12 year old came to that altar all those years ago, what was on his mind had nothing to do with loaves. It had everything to do with the hard work of being an adolescent. "Being not quite a child and not quite a grown-up either is hard work, and they look it," writes Frederick Buechner of adolescence. What was in that adolescent's immediate thoughts was how not to pass out because that would be devastating to one's reputational development. What was on his mind was whether or not he looked okay kneeling up there. What was on his mind was how soon would this be over.

Yet what the larger context of joining the church meant for his life was that he was taking a step across that great chasm between childhood and adulthood. Finally he was a full member, his parents would let him take communion, he was now a little more grown-up in the church, he had passed through a certain rite of passage.

What he failed to realize then, and what most of us who have gone through a similar church experience have never realized, is that the connection between confirmation and loaves is in a question that is never actually asked of us on the Sunday we join our church, but it's a question that is probably one of the most important ones that Jesus will ever ask of us. The question is subtle yet obvious. The question is difficult, yet not so difficult.

"How many loaves have you?," Jesus asked. "How many loaves have you?"

Maybe we don't hear the actual question when we join the church, but it is there none the less. "How many loaves have you?," Jesus asked the disciples. They had no idea what they had. They assumed, probably, that they had nothing worthwhile, nothing that could possibly feed 5,000 people, nothing that would make any difference. They looked in their baskets and discovered that they had only 5 loaves, probably just enough that they could make it stretch for their own supper.

Nikolai Berdyaev once said that there are two implications to the bread question – a material one and a spiritual one. "The question of bread for myself is a material question," he writes.

The disciples could honestly answer that part of Jesus' question. "How many loaves have you?" "We have enough to feed ourselves," was pretty much their answer. But what about the second implication of the question? According to Berdyaev, "the question of bread for my neighbor, for everybody, is a spiritual and a religious question." The disciples could not answer that spiritual question with integrity. They had no idea how to feed others. They could figure out how to feed themselves, but not how to feed everybody else.

So also when each of us is asked that very same question, can we respond with honesty and integrity to both implications. "How many loaves have you?" "Well, the truth is, I think I have enough in my figurative life's basket to keep *myself* alive, but when it comes to everyone else there are just not enough loaves in here to feed anyone else. Sorry."

It's sad that we don't know how to really take count of our loaves, but we're in good company I guess. The first disciples didn't know how either. It seems that they just looked at Jesus with blank stares until he said, "*Go and see.*" "How many loaves have you?", they shrug their shoulders, "Go and see," off they go like golden retrievers sent out after a duck. Still they found only 5 loaves and 2 fish, returning with no comprehension that they actually had enough to feed the crowd.

Jesus had to tell them to "go and see" otherwise they would have hung around all afternoon trying to guess. Counting your loaves takes movement – go and see – it means doing something to activate the counting process.

Those of you who connect with a community of faith like this church have answered some very valuable questions – but have we

followed with the action necessary to begin the go and see process, the counting of our loaves? Maybe that's not what immediately comes to mind when you think about what church membership means, because you don't actually hear Jesus ask how many loaves you have, but this is the first step in your "go and see" journey. What happens to you when you commit to life in a church community is the beginning of an exciting journey for you and for the Church.

You started that journey sometime in your life, I hope, and you should still be hearing that question whispered in your ear, "How many loaves have you?"

Just as the disciples assume that they do not have nearly enough to feed the huge crowd that has gathered for the day, so also do we often assume that we do not have nearly enough to make a substantial difference for anyone else. We are quick to jump to the conclusion that the only thing that we have to offer the Church is our presence in worship on Sunday. But that's not right. True, that's the answer to the material implication of the question.

We look in our basket and see enough to keep ourselves fed, "I can go to worship and feel pretty nourished by the time I leave." But what about the spiritual side of the question. Can I look in my basket and find enough in there to feed my neighbors, to feed those in my faith community? Can I find enough in my basket to feed everyone?

I once heard Henri Nouwen say that "burnout is what happens to a person who is constantly giving but never receives." God has created each of us with gifts to give, he said, and so when you give to someone, you must also be willing to get back from that person the gifts that he or she has to offer.

For my point here, I think the reverse of that is also true. You cannot merely receive from a community of faith, you must also give. You cannot only be fed by the worship of your faith

community, you must also give your gifts back to that community. If that doesn't happen, the institution burns out. If it does happen, the community is forever changed.

At the end of both stories that I shared with you today, I suggested that the community *was never the same again*. And I really meant that. The disciples and later the Church (that's us) were never the same as a result of the feeding of the five thousand. The story became so important to the faith community that variations of it showed up in every gospel, twice in Mark's gospel. The world was changed by that event and the stories surrounding it.

But what about the other story, the confirmation story. Isn't it a bit of an exaggeration to end with "he and the Church have never been the same since"? Did the confirmation of a 12 year old boy 38 years ago have any lasting effects on the Church? I think it's *not* an exaggeration because the influence of the little boy has to do with what he eventually found in his basket along his "go and see" journey that continues to this day.

What did he see in his basket? It was that same boy that just a few Easters earlier stood on the Sunday School stage with his future wife and the other 5 and 6 year old kids singing, "The Little Flowers Come Through the Ground". It was that same little boy that went to Camp Innabah in 1969 and cried through most of an extremely traumatic week of homesickness; the same little boy, that at age 17 just a few years after that confirmation, preached his first sermon in that same church; the same little boy that was elected church Treasurer at age 19. That same boy knelt at that same altar rail 11 summers later marrying that little girl from his Sunday School class. That same little boy agreed to chair that church's Board of Trustees at age 23. That same boy 19 years after that Confirmation Sunday, concerned that he might once more begin to shake uncontrollably, knelt at another altar before another minister, this one a Bishop, who laid her hands on his head and by

ordaining him an elder added to the confirmation (and affirmation) that the Church had always given him.

Gifts were given and received by the community and by the boy. That confirmation 38 years ago changed the boy and changed the Church. I can assure you from personal knowledge that it did.

When that boy finally took the "go and see" journey seriously and looked deeply into his basket, he was as surprised as the disciples were once the feeding was finished. In their baskets they found enough to feed themselves. In Jesus, they found enough to feed everyone else. We can also. You can look in your basket and find that your loaves are not only sufficient enough to feed yourself, but they will stretch far enough to feed others because they are loaves baked with your heart.

What is it that each of us has that can make a difference in this faith community and in it's corporate outreach?

Your basket, though you might only see five loaves, is filled with enough to feed everybody else. "Go and see." Begin this morning. Long time members, new members, soon-to-be-members, everyone present here and everyone in our extended family of disciples each has a basket filled with loaves. "How many loaves have you?" Don't be surprised when finally you "go and see". It looks like five, it's actually way too many to count.

Amen.