

LEFTOVERS – JULY 30, 2006

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg

John 6:1-21

I want us to relive that day on the hillside. Close your eyes if you're comfortable and imagine with me:

It is a beautiful warm spring day. The wind is blowing gently, rippling the deep green grass as it moves across the plain and up the rise of the hill. We have journeyed from a nearby town to hear the great teacher called Jesus of Nazareth – and apparently, almost everyone else in the towns around Lake Gennesaret has done the same because the slope of the hill throngs with men, women, and children of every age. It is after the noon hour as Jesus and his disciples come ashore from their boat on the lake; the crowd around us quiets as Jesus begins to teach.

It is not like anything we have ever heard. The God about whom Jesus speaks is one of great love and compassion, truly the Good Shepherd who sets a table of plenty in the midst of our greatest fears and who gives us more than enough if we but open our eyes and hearts to understand. This God is one whose love will never let us go, a God in whom we can rest our weary souls and whose joy will ease even our greatest pain. Jesus captivates the entire gathering; we, too, are held as though in a spell as Jesus weaves his stories of God for us.

The spell is broken when some of the men with Jesus approach him; they speak briefly with him. We speculate that they are asking Jesus to send us home, as it is getting toward the dinner hour and many of us still have long walks ahead of us. The men – they are called disciples, we hear – spread out through the crowd and as one approached us, we hear him ask if anyone has any food to share. No one near us does, but after a while the disciples interrupt Jesus again and give him what they found among us.

It is hard to see from our vantage point, but word spreads quickly that Jesus' followers found only five small barley loaves and two dried fish in the multitude. How, we wonder among ourselves, will we ever get home, hungry as we are now that we've had the chance to think about it?

Jesus lifts up a loaf of bread and one of the fish and gives the traditional blessing over it. Baruch
atta Adonai, Eloheynu malacholom...

He breaks the two fish into twelve pieces and divides the loaves the same way, then sends his disciples back into the crowd with baskets holding the broken pieces. As they work their way up the hill, they stop at each grouping to pass the basket around. Astonishment precedes the men as word speeds toward us that each basket is filled to overflowing even after the entire company of fifty or a hundred people has taken their fill. We are hard pressed to believe it until one of the disciples arrives at our group and holds the large basket out to a man on the outer edge of our area and we see for ourselves.

Truly, the basket can hold no more, and we watch incredulously as it never empties, even when the hungriest teenage boys with us take huge handfuls of bread and fish pieces. We eat, marveling that this is the best bread and the best dried fish we have ever had, and we watch as the disciples make their way through the rest of the crowd and back down to Jesus, each with a basket that still overflows with bread and fish.

Have you ever seen such LEFTOVERS? We ask each other as we walk home that evening. Surely, it was magic, some of us say. No, others say, it was people who were shamed into sharing. This experience is beyond anything we've ever encountered and we try to rationalize as best we can.

Only in the weeks following our day on the hillside do we realize that in Jesus' teachings we have been given the strength to live as the people God has been calling us to be. His people. Chosen. Beloved. Obedient not out of fear but out of love. We have witnessed a miracle. We will never be the same because we have seen God's abundant love with our own eyes.

In featuring this story, each of the Gospel writers wanted us to know *for sure* that the real meaning of this story is not about food, but about the miracle of God's abundant love and grace that surrounds us and empowers us to live our lives as God would have us live: chosen, beloved, moved by love to do God's work wherever we are in our lives. God has enough love for each of us and more LEFTOVER.

Now here's the best part about LEFTOVERS of love and joy: unlike the leftovers that sit in your refrigerator until you would swear some mad scientist is conducting research on new forms of life, these LEFTOVERS will never go bad. And also unlike the leftovers in your fridge, LEFTOVERS of love and joy replenish themselves – the more you use, the more you have to use.

How do you live out the abundance of God's love in your life? How does the joy that comes from knowing God loves you shine to the world? Let me tell you what I've seen from people whose joy for God's abundance lights the world with LEFTOVERS to spare.

A whole raft of people made sure that the parsonage was ready for me when I arrived on Memorial Day weekend, including clean carpets and a brand new front porch deck. There was even food for breakfast waiting for me! What a wonderful welcome that was, and an example of joy with LEFTOVERS to spare that so many people took part in that over the months leading to my arrival.

In our Vacation Bible School meeting Wednesday night, we got excited about the possibilities of VBS for our church and for our community. The men and women who volunteer their time for this ministry have an abundance of joy and light to share with the world, and you will see the LEFTOVERS spilling out into the congregation long after the week is over. I hope you will all come to share in that same joy so that you, too, will have LEFTOVERS aplenty.

A group of people here in this congregation, including Martha and Bill Benna, Linda Klyne, Dan Klyne, Charlotte Mock, Mae Nave, June Miller, Joanie Jones, Nancy Clark, and Eleanor Lamens, gave up their

time and talents to provide lunch for Dena Klemstine's family after her funeral on Wednesday. That's hard work, but the caring message it sends to the family is one of abundant love and hope in the midst of sadness and grief. I hope this ministry of funeral dinners continues for many years to come.

Now, I have to tell you that my biggest fear as far as staff was concerned when I finally got a full-time ministry position was working with the secretarial staff because I used to be a secretary/receptionist, and a pretty darned good one, at that. I was the crisis averter for the temp agencies I worked with – if a client needed ruffled feathers smoothed over or if there was a big project with a critical deadline, I was one of the elite go-to temps to keep the client happy; I even worked at the same company twice as a full-time employee because they wanted me back so much they met what I thought was a pretty unreasonable demand. Despite this fear that I would be overly critical and hard on secretaries, it seems God has given me secretaries just like me so I wouldn't have to worry about pushing them. Joyce, our secretary in Attleboro, is like Joanie only a bit older. Or, as I tell people there, Joanie is like Joyce, only a little younger. It's not only their secretarial abilities that make them such vital parts of the team, however: it's the joy with which they do their jobs.

Being a church secretary is a hard job, and I know that there are days when it must be hard for Joanie to come in with a smile and be cheerful and joyous – especially when things above and beyond her normal routines get added by, oh, say that crazy minister in the office behind her . . . But not once in the time I've been here have I seen or heard anything other than a smile and a joyous greeting to callers and visitors, whether they're parishioners, inquirers, or vendors. There is no better PR for a church than a secretary who has love and joy LEFTOVER to share abundantly!

Our prayer shawl group is another place I've seen joy and love with LEFTOVERS to spare. We gather to knit or crochet, but we do a lot of laughing and a lot of sharing as we work. All those who are knitting or crocheting, whether you attend the group or not, are sharing your LEFTOVERS of love and joy in every stitch. If you aren't knitting or crocheting, you can still share your LEFTOVERS by praying for those who are working on shawls or by making donations of yarn or money to cover costs of yarn, labels, and other supplies like cards and brochures. Over the next couple of months, we'll be putting our completed work out on display; on September 24, we'll be dedicating our shawl ministry and beginning the next phase, which is when these works of love, joy, and prayer will go out from here to spread the Good News to those in need of our tender loving prayers.

At the Bedford County Fair this past week, I saw one very patient father dealing with his warring children in a very patient yet firm way. The five year old hit his three year old pretty hard – but instead of spanking the five year old, this father put his hands on the boy's shoulder, turned him around, and knelt down to talk to him at eye level, all the while holding the three year old at arm's length to let him blow off steam. A few minutes later, that same three year old plopped down on the walkway in front of

the Lions' Club trailer and refused to follow the family when they moved off; Dad just turned around, picked him up, and carried him off without yelling or otherwise making a scene. It takes a great deal of leftover love and joy to cope with kids that calmly, especially in this day and age when it's so tempting to give in out of guilt because so many parents have so little time to spend with their children anyway.

Up at Conemaugh, I saw nurses and other caregivers doing their extraordinarily tough jobs caring for critically and terminally ill patients with smiles and great patience. No amount of money can explain the joy and love that is LEFTOVER as these men and women go about their work; it comes from deep within them, a conviction that what they do makes a difference in people's lives.

Most of us take these little pieces of daily life for granted, yet each of these to me is evidence that our God, who sets tables for us in the presence of all our enemies, who anoints our heads with the blessed oil of healing and belonging, and who fills our cups to overflowing is present and active in the world. I invite you to remember the miracle of baskets filled with LEFTOVERS to spare as you go through the rest of the summer and into the fall. I invite you to look for love and joy overflowing in your life and in other's lives, I invite you to celebrate our God of abundance and hope in every part of your life, even – or perhaps especially – the places that are dark or fearsome. For as long as God's love overflows in our lives, the valley of the shadow of death holds no sway and our hearts will be tuned to sing God's grace, sealed with God's love for heaven above.