



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

It is easy to miss the message of today's gospel in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. It is easy for us to miss that message because the miracle is incredibly powerful, something that goes beyond what we could ask or imagine as we read in our epistle. But there is a message in today's gospel that is critical for us to see. And if you miss that message, you miss everything. You not only miss the central claim of Christianity about Jesus, but you also miss the work and participation that each of us has to do so that we might see and make that message our own, so that we might become fully human. Because the promise of the gospel is not just a promise for eternal life, but it's a promise for this life. We believe in life before death, and we believe that following Jesus is the way we attain our full humanity.

So today's gospel is an invitation to receive a message about what it means to follow Jesus and what it means to be fully human. And we see that message signified in the word sign. There are three words in Greek for miracle. There's *teras*, which means "wonders." There is *dunamis*, which means "power," and there is *semeion*, which means "sign." And John rarely, if ever, uses the word *dunamis*. John rarely, if ever speaks about *teras* or wonders. John sees in the miracles that he writes about Jesus, a sign, a message, something that indicates something that we have to know and receive and understand.

In John, there are seven public signs and one private sign. It begins with John's description of Jesus healing and creating that miracle of water into wine at Cana of Galilee. And it ends with the raising of Lazarus in Chapter 11. And that book of signs tells us everything about who Jesus is. And the way we enter into that message and understand what's being said to us is to identify in the text two things. We have to identify the trouble in the text and see how that trouble in the text mirrors the trouble in our lives. And we have to see the grace in the text and see how that grace in the text is mirrored in the grace in our lives. And when we see those two together, holding them together, trouble and grace in the text and in our lives, we will begin to see why we need to follow Jesus and what it means to accept his invitation, to find our full humanity in Christ.

So the trouble in the text happens early on at the moment that Philip says to Jesus, where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? That is the trouble of

scarcity. It's the trouble of not having enough. And you and I see that mirror in our life every day, whether or not we are planning a meal and trying to somehow manage that or trying to make payroll. We know that trouble well, whether we are trying to pay a tuition or pay down a debt. You and I know that trouble well, and we know the scarcity under which it all is kind of enshrined in our lives.

Scarcity is something we deal with. We always have to manage. We always have to prioritize. We always have to somehow figure out ways around. It's the problem of life. And yet, if you allow yourself to only see scarcity in your world, if you adopt, which some call the mindset of scarcity, if all you can do is see what you cannot do, you live a less than fully human life. Because when you fall into that mindset of scarcity, you fall into that incredible trap of becoming fearful and reactive and rigid to all the things that God is trying to give you in your life.

And so we know the trouble in the text well, don't we? We know that that trouble in the text exists in the trouble in our lives. When we try to make ends meet, when we try to make payroll, when we try to make room at our table, when we try to somehow find a way to stretch our recipe so that everyone can eat, we know what that feels like intimately. It's part of human nature. But it is only part of human nature. And the problem that we face as human beings is we make that part the whole, but in fact, life involves much more than scarcity. And when we make our lives and have them governed by this mindset of scarcity, we live less than a human life. We end our lives fearful and reactive and rigid.

There's also grace in that text and that grace is mirrored in our lives. That grace comes to us as a moment of messianic fulfillment, because with Jesus there is abundance. And that is one of the main points of the signs of Jesus in the Gospel of John. It's meant to show you the power of abundance, of having more than enough, of having everything you need, of being surrounded by grace and plenty. Jesus turns water into wine. It would not have been a horrible wedding if they ran out of wine. It just would've maybe been a bit shorter. But Jesus, because He's there, He needs to make it into something more. Because there are weddings, you and I know intimately that when someone shows up and gets out of a hospital bed and walks the bride down the aisle, they engage in this act of incredible abundance. And we know those moments when life becomes more.

And we see in today's gospel an image, not only of the promise that is put forth in us from our reading from II Kings, where the prophet distributes the loaves to the people. But we see in today's gospel a kind of fulfillment in real time of a promise of resurrection that we read of in Isaiah. In Isaiah 25:6-10, we read the following promise:

"On this mountain, the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines. A food filled with marrow, well aged wine, strained clear. And God will destroy on this mountain, the shroud that is cast over all

peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord will wipe away tears from our eyes, from all faces, and the disgrace of the people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, lo, this is our God. We have waited for him so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

John has this in mind when he remembers the story of Jesus. It happens on the Passover, the moment of deliverance for the people of Israel, and it is an indication not only of the past, but is of the future. And so having Jesus in our lives, having His presence, the moment where He says, "It is I," to the disciples as they're battling the incredible storm on the sea, that is a sign of messianic fulfillment, that Jesus is the Messiah.

And there's also grace in the human response, that incredible divine abundance. When the little boy, and whenever you hear a child in the scriptures, you know that the little child will be the wisest one among them all. When a little boy offers the barley loaves and the fishes to Andrew and then Andrew brings it to Jesus, you see a kind of practice of abundance that is a kind of mirror to the practice of scarcity. To the mindset of scarcity, a kind of cure of the mindset of scarcity. He gives what he has to Jesus, and Jesus takes the bread and the fish. He blesses the bread and the fish, and He breaks the bread and the fish and He gives them to the people to partake. And suddenly there is abundance and suddenly there is enough.

And this is the *semeion* to us about the practice of abundance. It happens not only in the moment when we go through the incredible sacrament of our Lord's supper, when we following Jesus's command, take bread and bless it and break it and give it to all to partake in it. But it is a kind of practice of abundance that we need to see in our lives every day.

The art I have for this Sunday kind of communicates this beautifully well. It's by Tintoretto. It was done sometime in the mid 16th century. It's The Miracle of Loaves and Fishes. And you can see here that Tintoretto is following the gospel of John intimately. It's on your bulletin, and for those of you following at home, you can see it in front of you. There is this incredible, beautiful grassy place where people are sitting down, which we recall in the gospel, it talks about the grass. And you see in it women and children, and Tintoretto knows that when the Bible says 5,000 men, as it does say in the Greek, that means just those men were being counted. That means that there were tens of thousands of children and women with them. And they're all sitting comfortably. They're all resting in the presence of Jesus, and Jesus is in the middle sending out the food to all of them.

I want you to notice a couple of things in this painting that make it distinctive. The first is the child at the forefront who is feeding a dog. This is meant to convey

three things. The first is that in Renaissance art, whenever you see a dog, it's a symbol, a sign, a *semeion* of faithfulness, of fidelity, which is why when you see wedding scenes in Renaissance art, there's often a dog there because dogs are faithful. They're not always discerning. They're not always the smartest animals on the earth, but they are faithful.

The second thing I want you to see is you have a child feeding an animal, which is a kind of image of the redemption of all creation. It's a kind of moment, a little bit like when you see in other depictions a child with the adder in some of the visions of paradise.

And then, finally, you see that incredible chapter that happens in both Luke and Mark, where Jesus encounters a Syrophenician woman, and she begs him to heal her child. And when Jesus says that He can't do it, because the food He has is only for the children of Israel, it's not good to give that food to dogs. And the woman says, yes, Lord, but even the dogs gather up the crumbs under your table. And that was something that every Christian would say before taking communion.

And so this is a reminder of the fact that in the Gospel of John, this is the institution of the Eucharist in the feeding of 5,000. At the Last Supper, Jesus doesn't say, this is my body, this is my blood. Instead, He washes His disciples' feet. And that changes, of course, everything for what John is trying to say to us.

The second thing I want you to see in this that goes with the grain of today's gospel is the fact that Tintoretto makes this a wide and short painting. It's a long rectangle. It was not meant to be hung in a church. It was actually meant to be hung in a guild, a confraternity, a gathering of tradesmen, so that they would not be subject to the mindset of scarcity alone, but that they would incorporate in their daily life decisions, abundance and practice it.

You and I are called to resist that mindset of scarcity because it is part of human nature, but it only is part of what it means to be fully human in Christ. You and I are called to be practitioners of abundance, of stepping into that abundance and making it our own, of giving up some of what we have so that there can be more than what we have. Because somehow in God's economy there is always more when we give things to God. It's a kind of miracle that happens every day.

And I have seen that miracle happen again and again in this church. And sometimes I am the only one who gets to see the sign. But it happens when we give of ourselves, when we buy shoes for the children around us so that they would have shoes to wear when they go to school, because there's nothing that says that "you're special" than a new pair of shoes on the first day of school. Or when we engage in this capital campaign and we give of ourselves so that future generations for the next hundred years will know this place as a place of generosity, and will continue that legacy of generosity that we've had for the past a hundred years.

But we also see it in little things that I get to see that mean the world to me. Last week we got a call at the church. Someone asked us to come and say prayers. They didn't have enough money, they explained, to have a church funeral, but they were going to gather at a Knights of Columbus, and they hoped one of us could come and say a prayer. And so I said, yes, I'll do this. I'm happy to do this. Father Chris preached all weekend, second week in a row. I thought it would be nice to let him smoke a cigarette or whatever he does to relax.

So I went down to Twelve Mile to a Knights of Columbus. And many of you don't know because I am educated and cultured and love all those things like art, my family was working class. I came from Torrington, Connecticut. And when I was growing up in Torrington, Connecticut, we had a 14% unemployment rate. I was one of two people in my grammar school class who went to college. And so when I walked into that Knights of Columbus, I immediately saw the reality that I lived with every day growing up. Yes, my parents struggled so that I would get an education, and for that I am eternally grateful, but we were never allowed to forget who we were. And we would always show up for those occasions, it was always our way of gathering.

And the minute I walked into that Knights of Columbus and I saw the large trays on chafing dishes of pasta, I knew where I was. And I said to a friend that I talked with who was my oldest friend, I said, you know what that was like. There are round tables full of beautiful people who clock in every day and clock out every day. And these are the people who keep our country going. And they were wearing their best for a woman named Kathy who died at 70 from complications from MS.

And I came in and I stepped in front of them and I told them that they were incredibly special. A hundred and fifty of them had gathered to be with each other and remember Kathy. And they had created this incredible altar to her with candles and pictures. I said I would lead them through a bit of an exercise and then we would offer a prayer. And I said, give me a word for Kathy and someone raised their hand and said, "spunky." I said, good. What else? "Funny." I said, great. Funny. What else? Someone said, "hungry." I said, why'd you say hungry? They said, "Well, she loved donuts," and I knew that at this point I had to ask a very important question. I said, Donut Cutter or Dutch Girl? You have a choice in Detroit between the two. And they said, "Neither." I said, what? They said "Krispy Kreme." And I said, well, I can relate to that because I used to live in Tennessee and when I would see that neon sign, "hot donuts," it was like the car was ahead of its time and was kind of self-driving. It just went right over there. And when you smash them together, they're even better.

And then I said, what else? And someone said, "Guardian, because when I was a little boy, Kathy protected me when I went to school." I said, what else? Someone said, "Savior," that was her sister. She said Kathy had saved her life twice. And

then finally someone said "accepting," because they knew that if they had to get home or they were in trouble with their parents, they could always drive to Kathy's house and she would take them in and would tell their parents that they had gotten there earlier and spent the night with her.

Kathy was special, this family was special, and I told them that they knew abundance in ways that many people don't know. They held a little collection and they gave me \$350 cash for showing up. And I didn't want to insult them. I accepted the gift, but I told them that my needs, thankfully, were being paid for by Christ Church Cranbrook, but we would take this gift and make sure that children had shoes. We'd take this gift and make sure that we would cover the costs of anybody who came to us with an urgent need over the winter with their heater.

That is what we do day in and day out. Whenever we take and do a funeral, we have a contribution to our parish discretionary account and we share it with those who have need. That practice of abundance was something that I found there and that I brought there because of this church. As we go forward together, as you make your decisions at the most microeconomic levels and at the most macroeconomic levels, as you consider the shape of your life, practice abundance, it will make you fully human in Christ and it will be a witness, even a sign to the world we live in.

Amen.