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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

John 6:1-15

4 September 2022

A Child's Generosity

Opening Greeting and Prayer:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning also to you who join us online.

Welcome to each guest that is with us this morning. We pray that your hearts and minds are encouraged and strengthened by your time with us this morning.

Please join me in prayer: God of enough and even more, we thank you that the renewed family that you have created through Jesus has enough for everyone to be a part and to be satisfied. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear this story today and the ways that you are drawing us into thinking, not in realistic terms limited by the harsh realities of our world, but in terms of the hope and presence of the Messiah, who has shown us the way. In Jesus name. Amen.

Message:

Summer of Stories 2022. We are talking about children in the Bible, especially those children specifically mentioned as an important character in the plot, even a catalyst for the entire story.

We have moved since the beginning of July from the earliest families of the Bible to today, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in the Galilean countryside in the first century CE. Galilee is under Roman occupation. Another empire has swept across the Middle East as empires have done since Samaria's exile 800 years prior. We no longer think in terms of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel as we have for a few weeks. In the first century, Kings rule in Galilee and in

Jerusalem, but they have been placed there by the Roman Empire. Since the exile, the temple has been rebuilt but the priests also selected by Rome and presiding over it have other allegiances.

Now you might be wondering why I would start with such a bleak picture of this era, especially when we can sense the excitement and energy in our scripture reading. Jesus struggles to go anywhere in Galilee without being followed by a large crowd, yearning to hear his teaching, to receive his healing, and to be among his following when he finally inaugurates his official kingdom. Wandering teachers and healers claiming to be Messiah were not uncommon at this time, especially ones that ended in failure when they finally gathered enough followers to attempt to retake Jerusalem as the Maccabees had done almost 200 years prior. Rome was merciless in crushing insurrection or rebellion, but that did not mean that the poor of Galilee could not hope in this one, this Jesus from Nazareth, this one of their own, one who had grown up and continued to wander in the wilderness with them.

Jesus needs a break, a reminder that he is a person, not merely an angel or apparition or ghost, which is why he travels to the other side of the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, hoping to gain some reprieve from the great needs of the crowds. But the people of Galilee are persistent, and they have heard what Jesus has done for others, so they continue searching for him. They find him again on the other side. Jesus looks up from where he and the disciples have finally sat down to rest and probably sees the crowd, even hears the dull roar of the crowd as they rumble across the earth. The conversation between them on the mountain has gone silent as Jesus is lost again in compassion. I wonder if the disciples knew that look in Jesus's eye, knowing that their short time with Jesus was under siege again from their friends and neighbors. I wonder too if Jesus has already spotted the boy with his bag near the front of the crowd as they approach.

Maybe the boy had been wandering with his family in the crowd for some time. Maybe he had someone close to him who needed Jesus's miraculous power to heal them. Either way, the boy is determined to get to Jesus and quite possibly one of the first to arrive. Or maybe the boy knows better than to get too close and gain too much of anyone's attention, so he wanders not too far off so he can remain unnoticed, yet hear what Jesus is saying. As the roar of the crowd continues to build so does the tension among the disciples. Exasperation, exhaustion, and irritation have pushed them to their limits, so when Jesus turns to Philip and asks him how they might buy enough bread to feed those that are coming, Philip is incredulous. Responding realistically, Philip says that a half-year of daily-laboring wages would not buy even enough bread for everyone to have a small piece. I can think of a few of Philip's possible thoughts: "Well, Jesus, in this economy and time, how would anyone feed a crowd this size? Not to mention, even if we were able to buy it, where would we get that much bread? No one in any of the neighboring villages or cities will have that much made for a single meal. You might be identifying with Philip, too, marveling at the naivete of Jesus's question.

Whether the boy hears the murmuring among the disciples as they panic about where they are going to get bread, or he had already heard Jesus mention feeding the crowd, he comes closer to hear more of what they might be planning. Suddenly, one of the disciples notices his presence and the bag hanging from his shoulder and asks him if he has anything to eat. The boy stares back at him silently, contemplating if he will tell him, but maybe this is his chance to talk to Jesus. The boy sheepishly looks up again and says that he has five loaves of barley bread and two fish. The disciple gives another disciple a look and then grabs the strap of the bag before the boy can step back; the boy watches as he walks away with it. Now what was he going to bring back to his family when he rejoined them.

But, pause that speculation; maybe it didn't happen that way. Maybe we want to think better of Jesus's disciples, though I can't help but view them through my experience with my older brother. Maybe the boy overheard Jesus ask Philip about where to buy bread and thought about the great stories that he had heard about Jesus. He had provided wine for a wedding in Cana when there wasn't enough. He had healed many of his neighbors from his village as well as many from other surrounding villages too. Word travelled fast when Jesus returned to the region on his travels. Maybe the boy realized in that moment that Jesus might be able to do something with what little he had to offer. If he could make more for a wedding party, could he not also do something with the bread and fish for the crowd today? So the boy walked up to one of the disciples, Andrew, and tapped his arm trying to get his attention. When Andrew notices him, he opens his bag and shows him what he has to offer. At first Andrew seems annoyed but then it dawns on him too that this bag of bread and fish might be exactly what is needed, so he takes the bag from the boy to Jesus. The boy hears him tell Jesus that he has found this much food, but he follows it up with his own reasonable doubts. What could 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish really offer to this many people? Jesus begins directing them: have everyone sit, so the boy wanders away, excited that he could offer the rabbi something useful, but what would he tell his family?

As he wandered around looking for them, he couldn't believe how quiet the crowd was becoming. He finally found his family among those who had been the last to arrive and be seated. When he sat down, his mother asked him where the bread was that she had made that morning. He looked down, shrugged his shoulders, and almost got his first words out when that same disciple arrived behind him, asking him to sit. He quickly sat next to one of his siblings and waited to see what the disciple might say, but he didn't say anything. He handed his mother some bread and fish and then walked away as he gave the boy a wink. The boy smiled to himself

as he realized that Jesus had done it. As he looked out across the crowd again, he noticed that everyone had bread and fish. Maybe it was true what he had heard his parents and so many others in his village talking about. Could this be the Messiah, the new Moses come from God to renew God's people, the great prophet come to set things right, to bring peace and justice to the earth? The boy didn't know, but what he did know was that his family was fed even though he had given up what was rightfully theirs to eat, and Rabbi Jesus had used even just that little bit to show that God was even here in the wilderness.

One way to think about this story as we walk away from church today is to wonder which follower of Jesus that we identify most with from the story. Am I Philip, the dismissive realist? Am I Andrew, the uncertain but willing realist? Or am I the boy, the ambitious, even generous, optimist? When you hear that you are the hands and feet of Jesus, working toward the fulfillment and realization of God's in-breaking kingdom, a kingdom where everyone has enough, even enough to eat, how do you respond? Each of the voices in our story has something important to offer the conversation, so I don't mean to imply that we must always be like the boy.

In addition, we cannot miss the political and religious points that the author of John's gospel is making either in this story. Jesus is the Messiah, sent from God and fulfilling all that has been predicted as both prophet and king, for he is the new Moses among his people in the wilderness outside the halls of power in Rome or Jerusalem, and like God provided bread for ancient Israel in the wilderness outside of Egypt, so God will provide for God's renewed people in this time in the first century and even for us, though it might not be as we expect. It might be the children among us who see or create the solutions among us. What we do know by the end of this story is that though Caesar has done the same thing, offering mass-feedings on the empire's dime and claiming that the empire can bring security and peace, Jesus has shown up the empire

for its powerlessness because these people are still hungry. We must be careful when we think that we can legislate or force generosity and care upon our broken world. Like the boy inspired to give of what little he had, we must realize that generosity comes from a changed and renewed heart, one transformed by the power of the Spirit in someone who has chosen to follow in Jesus way as the boy had already done.

Closing prayer:

Great creator, you have shown us the way of enough and inspired a community of enough, the church. Through Jesus the great prophet-king, you have shown us another way to be through the power of your life-giving breath, the Holy Spirit. You have assured us that when we give of what little we have to offer, you can make so much more of it than what we could have ever produced had we held it for ourselves. Let us see your way anew. In Jesus' name. Amen.