

# Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Proper 12 (17) Jul 28, 2024

Prelude

Gathering Hymn: "Holy, Holy, Holy!" #76 VT

Welcome / Announcements / Land Acknowledgment

Call to Worship: Psalm 145:10-18 (Patrick)

All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.  
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known  
to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is  
faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.  
The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.  
You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.  
The LORD is just in all his ways and kind in all his doings.  
The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Hymn: "All Creatures, Worship God Most High" #381 VT

Lighting the Peace Lamp (Colin)

Time with the Children (Patrick)

Offering & Offertory: "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" (arr. Colin Ens Funk)

Joys, Concerns, and Congregational Prayer

Hymn: "God Speaks to Us in Bird and Song" #539 VT

Scripture: Lynn

A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD: They shall eat and have some left." He set it before them; they ate and had some left, according to the word of the LORD. (2 Kings 4:42-44)

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:1-14)

Sermon: Elaine Enns & Ched Myers

Hymn of Response: "Put Peace into Each Other's Hands" #485 VT

Benediction: (Patrick)

Sending Hymn: "Go, My Friends, in Peace" #839 VT;

Postlude

**Elaine:** Good morning dear NPMC family: As a child of this church, it is good to be back with you today. As many of you know, Ched & I live and work in southern California on traditional Chumash territory. That is a *long* way from here, and I feel the distance from you all in time and space keenly—*especially* when it comes to keystone community moments that commemorate living and dying. In the past two weeks I have attended the memorial of my *oldest* uncle, Jake Enns in Carrot River, and presided at the wedding of my *youngest* niece, Lauren Hooge.

This year, however, we are missing something Ched & I have *always* done during our annual summer sojourn here: visiting with Vern Ratzlaff, who has now joined the communion of saints. Thank you, church, for the beautiful memorial you held two months ago for Vern, which we watched from our home over Live stream. Vern was many things: an MCC worker in peace and development; a theological interpreter; an ecumenical animator. But to me he was above all our family pastor here at NPMC: he baptized me, dedicated most of my nieces and nephews as infants, officiated at our wedding, buried both of my parents, and welcomed Ched into the Mennonite church in 2008. So yesterday we paid respects at his and Helen’s gravesite in Aberdeen, and today we have come to honor him here at the place he ministered for so long. We are grateful to Patrick for allowing us to stand in the pulpit this morning, at our request, to offer some reflections.

Of course, Vern would want us to *first* pay attention to our scriptural readings. So we turn to reflect on these *old* and *older* feeding stories, which transmit a genealogy of faith that extends right up to our present moment in *this* beloved community. 308

**Ched:** In Palestine/Israel 13 years ago, Elaine and I fulfilled a lifelong dream to stand at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where our Christian movement began two millennia ago. We visited the nearby church of the Loaves and Fishes, where just beneath the altar is a rock which tradition says was the “table” for Jesus’ feeding of the multitudes. In front of that rock is a 4<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine mosaic of the loaves and fishes that you see here. This holy place, featuring one of the earliest of Christian symbols, reminded us that at the heart of our tradition is a commitment to justice and sustenance for all.

The famous story about the loaves and fish is one of the few traditions to appear in all four of our gospels; here we have John’s version, which follows Mark’s unusually closely. This venerable narrative explicitly alludes to the soup and bread story from 2 Kings which we also just heard, in which the prophet Elisha facilitates a feeding of desperately hungry people in a time of famine. Here you see the echoes highlighted in yellow.

In both stories, the plot unfolds in four parts:

- 1) They open with a dilemma posed by hungry crowds;
- 2) The prophet’s disciples are instructed to respond to this need, but are skeptical that the meager rations available are sufficient;

- 3) the prophet then reiterates that the community must nonetheless distribute what is on hand;
- 4) The “miracle” turns out to be not some sort of magical multiplication, but how the prophet organizes the people to share. Both Elisha and Jesus return gratitude to the Great Giver, then pass on the gift of sustenance in a way that results in “enough for all—and then some.”

Both feedings thus represent demonstration projects in the divine economy of grace that animates community practices of mutual aid.

John’s version repeats Mark’s symbolic numbers at the conclusion: from the **5** loaves shared, **12** baskets of leftover pieces were gathered. **Five** invokes the books of Torah, and **12** signifies the body politic of both Israel *and* the church: 12 tribes, 12 disciples.

There is something archetypal going on in these old stories of feeding the hungry. That’s because they are remembering and recontextualizing the even older, *primal* story of manna in the wilderness found in Exodus 16—which happens to be the Hebrew Bible reading for *next* Sunday!

This ancient tale narrates the first lesson God gives to the Hebrews coming out of slavery in Egypt. Contrary to our Sunday School felt board versions of this story, Exodus 16 is actually a catechism in alternative *economics*. It consists of three instructions (Ex 16:4) about how the people should gather the gift of sustenance:

1. They must make sure that whoever gathers more *doesn’t* gather too much, and whoever gathers less has *enough* (16:16-18). This is a specific repudiation of the economic stratification and disparity that characterized imperial Egypt;
2. They should not try to accumulate the manna (16:19-21). Keep in mind that the Hebrews had been slaves building “store cities” into which Egyptian regime stockpiled extracted wealth. Whenever we try to transform gift into possession, it leads inevitably to concentrations of wealth and inequity;
3. And the people will only remember the first two instructions by observing the Sabbath (16:22-30), which articulates an ethos and practice of *limits* on our extraction, consumption and labor.

In our work, we call this the biblical vision of “Sabbath Economics,” which is the divine template for how humans are supposed to relate to the material world. These instructions were predicated on the theological conviction that Creation has enough for everyone’s *need*, but not for everyone’s *greed*. So remember this when you hear Exodus 16 next week.

Centuries later, Elisha rehabilitates this ancient catechism in his response to the ravages of famine. And many more centuries down the line, Jesus embodies the practice of Elisha and Moses in *his* wilderness feeding. Let us note four aspects of John’s version of the loaves and fish tradition that weave together these stories:

- First, he stipulates that the loaves are made from *barley* (Jn 9:9)—just like in the Elisha story.
- Second, John frames Jesus’ instruction as a “*test*” (Jn 6:6a)—just like in the Exodus manna tale.
- Third, Jesus sets about *organizing* the community for sharing (Jn 6:10)—because Sabbath Economics is about changing habits.
- And finally, note the three verbs John’s Jesus uses in the distribution in verse 11: “take,” “give thanks,” and “give.”

This is the same sequence of verbs used in the synoptic gospel accounts of the Last Supper! Indeed, “give thanks” in Greek is *eucharisteō*, whence our term Eucharist.” This means that the Sabbath Economics story is baked into the church’s most central sacrament. But we miss all this if we don’t remember the old stories of enough for everyone. Which is why later in chapter 6 John specifically ties Jesus’ loaves and fish “performative sign” to that primal catechism of the manna (6:30-31).

We modern folk, like Israel of old, have forgotten and forsaken God’s vision of Sabbath Economics. In particular, we who are children of capitalism fight it with all our sophisticated might. The old story actually anticipates our resistance with a bit of humor. The word manna means: “What the heck is this stuff?” Which is to say, we recognize neither the divine gift nor the ethos of equity and sufficiency, because we have been so deeply socialized into an imperial cosmology of consumption and accumulation.

Consequently, today we must reckon with the interlocking global catastrophes of social disparity and ecological overdraw. In our historical moment of crisis, these ancient stories urge us to face and heal our epidemic of Affluenza, and to work as churches to resist the rise of Plutocracy, which is to say domination by the rich, systems under which greed rather than need determines our personal and political behavior. (870)

**Elaine:** This vocation is captured in the title of Ched’s new book, which he finished writing a month ago—and is copyediting during our stay here in SK! *Healing Affluenza and Resisting Plutocracy: Luke’s Jesus and Sabbath Economics* will be out in January—just in time to accompany the church in its preaching and study of the Year C lectionary! Patrick we’ll send you a copy when it comes out, and hope that you all might find this resource useful in the coming year.

Now Vern Ratzlaff *loved* to talk to Ched about his earlier book on Mark’s gospel. He even started into a theological discussion about it *in the middle of our wedding ceremony* in this very space 25 years ago—but *only* so he could see the distressed look on my face! (You all know well that Vern had a great sense of humor, and was the prince of dad jokes.) But I want to close this morning by correlating the sacred stories we’ve just looked at to Vern’s ministry, who in so many ways embodied their vision.

Of course, there were many, beautiful testimonies about this at the memorial service in May. I just want to add a few examples of how Vern seemed to make things “more bounteous” in his work with people. I recall fondly the enfranchising way he interacted with my young nieces and nephews, both during and outside of church services. They would run up to him, calling “Vern, Vern,” to share stories, in which he invariably delighted. As formidable a presence as he was, he was never too formal for little kids. I saw this also at church socials at the old Churchill School; Vern would be right there dancing, often sporting silly costumes, and having a ball. He had time enough for everyone.

This commitment to inclusion extended to theological students, who similarly felt his warm accompaniment at Saskatoon Theological Union. Vern generously participated in overseeing my Doctor of Ministry project at St. Andrews, which eventually became our book *Healing Haunted Histories*. And Vern was well known for his initiatives to build ecumenical and interfaith relationships around Saskatoon, convinced as he was that God’s grace was “enough for everyone.”

Vern’s demonstration of God’s abundance also extended to the weak and dying. On our final visit with him last year at Sunnyside, we were impressed with how he was still ministering in that place. He took time to introduce us to a woman with severe dementia with whom he would often sit, being present when few others would. Compassion enough for everyone.

Which brings me to one more moment, which is burned into my consciousness. It occurred the day after my father Beno died--too early--twenty years ago. My mother, already showing signs of Alzheimer’s, was sitting with our family in our living room on Riel Crescent, confused about the grief that was swirling around her. Vern walked in, knelt in front of her, wrapped his long arms around her, and they both commenced weeping, joined by all of us in the room.

Like the Jesus he followed, Vern’s ministry was about inviting people to the table of God’s love, and "gathering up the fragments so that nothing may be lost." May we endeavor to do likewise. (550)