



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday November 20<sup>th</sup> 2016 – Next Before Advent

*“When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten.”*

**✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Ghost ✠**

In five weeks, it will be New Year's Eve - a day when we send off the old year and welcome in the new one. And I for one, like many Americans, will be very happy to see 2016 shuffle off. 2016 has been an extremely rough year on a lot of people, and on us as a country. In 2016, we lost David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, Gene Wilder, Prince, Merle Haggard, Mother Mary Angelica, Maurice White, Alan Rickman, and one of my favorite actors, Angus Scrimm. A dear friend of mine lost his father and grandmother a month apart, and people close to me experienced everything from chronic illness to marital discord, Seamus and I were both in the hospital, and our country had the roughest and most divisive election in any of our lives.

As a nation and as individuals, we are just plain exhausted. And if you're among the lucky few who doesn't personally feel that way, I assure you - you're surrounded by people who do; a lot of people are just barely getting by emotionally and spiritually. We are in desperate need of being refilled and recharged in a way that I've not previously seen in my life. So it's a pretty apropos time for today's Gospel reading which recounts the the feeding of the 5,000; just like the multitudes, we've been following Jesus, learning from what He had to teach us even two thousand years later, but the elements and the circumstances have gotten to us, and a lot of people are just plain

tuckered out. And if they don't get something to feed them soon, they're going to faint.

That's precisely why this miracle is so important. It's not simply that Jesus created something from nothing, or from very little; it shouldn't surprise us that God amongst us who had cured lepers and raised people from the dead, could also feed people. It's a profoundly important moment, but compared to raising people from the dead, and indeed beating death itself after three days in the tomb at the end [spoiler alert], feeding folks seems on the surface perhaps a bit less miraculous.

The thing is, while we know the actual institution of Sacrament of the Eucharist happened at the last supper, this prefiguring miracle illustrates the function of it so much more. In performing this miracle, Jesus is not merely feeding the stomachs of the five thousand, He is showing in a far more illustrative way that He is the bread of life, the spiritual food that will feed mankind and nourish our souls. This feeding of the masses is a bold declaration that He is the thing which will sustain and nourish all those who dare to put their faith in Him. What's more, he puts his apostles to work feeding the people this early sacrament, and establishes that any apostle or priest that follows in their footsteps is to be a servant of all those who would follow them, and continue to feed

them this bread of life in both word and sacrament.

There's a reason this is the one miracle that is recorded in kind by all four of the evangelists - while we gather how we are to live as Christians and conduct our worship in church, this miracle is an amazingly subtle summary of how the church works - the Word of God is preached, the ministers serve the people in their charge, and nobody is turned away from being fed both spiritually and corporeally, and we rely on a simple faith to allow it to happen.

But the miracle isn't finished yet, as the exclamation point at the end of the narrative is that there were twelve baskets left. They ate until they were full. They didn't just eat until they were no longer hungry to the point of fainting. No, they ate until they were full and it's obvious that they ate until they were *well* full. It's not just that they ate until they were full, they ate until they were satisfied. And only in Christ, the bread of Heaven, can that satisfaction be found. Jesus didn't just give them as much as they needed, He gave them an *abundance*; and at the end, he told them to gather up what remained, that *nothing be wasted*.

We cannot view life as something to endure. In Jesus, there is abundance. And in that abundance, life goes from being something that can from time to time be an exhausting marathon, to something we celebrate. And through that abundance, we can help *others* to celebrate life. When somebody we love is drained and has very little left, and perhaps can only muster "oh God, get me through this day," the fact that we are blessed with our own proverbial basket of leftovers, will allow us to minister to them, and to be a blessing to them. And in using our abundance to bless others and to be charitable to them in heart or deed, we continue to obey Christ that of the abundance, *nothing be wasted*.

Maybe there are times where we don't want to our problems to Christ, because there's over a billion people in the world and we feel too small. But in Christ there is an abundance of understanding. Or perhaps we don't want to go to Christ for forgiveness of our sins, because maybe it's one we've struggled with for a long time - weeks,

months, maybe decades? And we're shy to ask forgiveness *not* because we don't mean it, but because we think Jesus is sick of hearing it when He knows we'll probably just goof up again; but in Jesus, there's an abundance of forgiveness. Or perhaps you've lost the faith altogether and wish you knew where to find it again; maybe you just show up here every week because we have the best choir and the best coffee hour and the best Communion wine in Maryland. And you want to find that faith again, but you don't know how; in Christ, there is abundant grace, and all He asks is for what you likely already have - a bit of faith no larger than a mustard seed. Nurture it, and He'll handle the rest...but don't wait forever; Advent is a great time to reboot.

So the next time we pray, we need to remember to pray for spiritual abundance. Jeremiah 29:11 says "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" Let's pray for abundance - not for our own glory, but to serve others. If you're mourning, don't just pray that you'll be consoled - pray that your mourning will be turned to joy (Jer 31:13), as the Bible says, so that you may help others who are mourn. If you are sick, don't just pray that you'll feel better - pray that you'll be so healed, you can serve the sick.

So when you come to the altar today, leave your exhaustion there and allow God to repair it. The sacrament of the Eucharist is Christ's gift to us. Just as He fed the 5,000 in this miracle, He feeds us today when we come together to eat and drink of Him in this holy mystery. This is where we are recharged and fed; not only in our prayer and worship, but in our fellowship - and most mystically, in the practice of the sacraments. Use today's Eucharist as a chance to refill and replenish whatever you've lost this year, whatever spiritual aches you have, and count on Jesus providing not only refreshment, but an abundance of blessing, so that you may continue to be His hands and His body here and now. ***Amen***