

John 6: 1-21 “What’s that in your hands?”
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At risk of taking liberties with the Sacred Scriptures, I’d like to offer a slightly revised version of this well known story found in John 6. Let’s call it the “21st Century Church-in-America Version.”

When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, and realized they were hungry, he called his disciples aside and said to them: “Dearly beloved, let us convene an exploratory commission to consider the nature of this people’s hunger: its causes, its scope, and its likely duration. If deemed advisable, let us afterward create a new committee: (#1) to estimate the cost of feeding such a crowd, and (#2) to produce a feasibility study in order to gauge our congregation’s level of preparedness for tackling such a daunting challenge. Now therefore, let us send these people away, assuring them—with many and sundry assurances—that a full report of the commission will produce its preliminary findings in six months’ time. Nine for the Anabaptists, who really hate to rush.” Philip and Andrew [—relieved at not having to share their olive & hummus sandwiches, which they had hastily stashed in their loose-fitting tunic sleeves upon spotting the famished multitude—] eagerly delivered Jesus’s words to the crowd. Though slightly disappointed, the people nevertheless accepted the words of their teacher, stumbling back to their homes in a malnourished stupor.”

Of course, no one would be talking about this story today if those had been the words of Jesus. Instead, he says to his disciples, “The people are hungry. Call them to sit down, and start feeding them now with whatever you’ve got in your hands.”

I don’t think I’m going out on a limb to say we’re living in difficult days.

Like many people I talk to these days, I have an inescapable feeling that we’re experiencing a pivotal—and dangerous—moment in our shared history as a nation. Just last week while washing dishes, when the Emergency Alert System sounded on NPR, it was the first time in my life that I listened to the entire, hair-curling signal assuming it was not a test. Before I could catch myself, thoughts were racing through my head of a massive Russian cyber attack, or a rogue North Korean missile striking the West Coast, or civil war breaking out along the southern border, or five

other apocalyptic scenarios I entertained before the radio announcer finally reassured us listeners that “this is only a test.”

On the one hand, this urgency we feel is born of the sheer scale & unapologetically public nature of violence & exploitation we’re seeing today in the wave of autocratic regimes—paired with the rise of predatory corporate empires—currently sweeping the globe.

On the other hand, this sense of urgency we feel is born of a growing awareness among those once protected by middle-class, American, white-male privilege who are now, suddenly, realizing—maybe for the first time—what our brown and black and female and queer and undocumented and juvenile and non-Christian and indigenous sisters & brothers have known, all too well, for far too long.

Whether you’re among those who have always known the grip of institutionalized exploitation, or among those feeling it in a new way, we all now share a part of this common moment: the moment where Jesus is saying, “The multitude is desperate. What’s in your hands? No one else is coming to the rescue. Act now, and feed the people yourselves.”

To be clear, I honestly do believe there’s a place & a time for committees & focus groups & feasibility studies & risk assessments. I’m an educator in the public school system. I know a thing or two about committees and assessments.

But, for churches across the country today, I can’t help but feel like the time for “*further thoughtful reflection before acting*” is **not** when children are being torn from their mothers’ arms by the very government funded by our taxes & acting in our name—and then justifying that demonic policy using biblical quotes.

I can’t help but feel that the time for more analysis from the church is **not** when every continent in the northern hemisphere is, at this very moment, experiencing life-threatening climate-change disasters—in the form of fatal heat waves, flooding, drought, and wildfires—including wildfires fueled by a freak heat wave in the Arctic Circle. All the while, our politicians continue to deny climate change & a massive, new, climate-warming, fracked-gas pipeline is about to go operational right here in our own county.

I can't help but think that the time for action-delaying discernment is **not** when our neighbors of color can't walk on the streets of our neighborhoods without literally fearing for their lives.

Instead, this is a time to act. Boldly, decisively, and without delay.

In our story today, Jesus says to a well-intentioned but overly cautious Andrew, "Guess what, dear friend? We don't have 6-months to save-up enough salary to feed all these people. The need is urgent, and the crisis is now. Make them all sit down, and figure out how to feed them *today* with what you have."

And let's not forget that at the center of this story stands an unnamed kid who offers his bag-lunch to some hungry strangers.

Adults are notorious for overlooking what kids have to offer with their hands. And mouths. And heads. And hearts.

Andrew, who's referred to in the story as "Peter's brother"—(I bet he loved hearing that everywhere he went)—even Andrew, Peter's brother, falls into that trap of overlooking the kid. "Hey Jesus," he says. "There's a boy here with a couple fish and some loaves of bread. But, of course, that's hardly worth mentioning. I don't even know why I brought it up. Sorry to waste your time, Jesus...son of Mary."

Jesus, however, does not make the same mistake. Instead of dismissing the child's lunch, Jesus latches onto it. And that kid's impossibly inadequate act of generosity triggers the only miracle that's recorded in all four gospels.

I love the knack Jesus has for trusting his instincts.

I love that Jesus dared to lean into this crazy hunch, believing that as soon as the radical "why not start somewhere?" naiveté of the unnamed boy infected the risk-averse adults around him, the floodgates of miraculous generosity would be opened wide. And the dare paid off.

I know the gospel commentator throws in that forced reference about Jesus "testing" his disciples—that "Jesus knew from the start" what would happen. But the writer of John has a notoriously high-christology that often struggles against the ad-hoc nature of Jesus' ministry. So I'm a little skeptical of the certainty imputed to our

Lord by our narrator. Based on all the other evidence available in this narrative, I'm convinced that Jesus acted on nothing more than a godly hunch—a risky gamble his gut told him was worth taking, but in no way guaranteed. Not even for Jesus.

And it really was a risk. Think about it. What if no one but the kid had offered a lunch that day? What if Jesus's high-stakes "object lesson" [about confronting urgent needs with nothing more than what we have in our hands] had fallen utterly flat—had ended with everyone sitting down, but with no one sharing what they had, everyone awkwardly waiting for the heavens to part—*and then nothing happening* beyond the collective growling of empty stomachs?

But nonetheless, Jesus crashes headlong into the pregnant moment of need, dragging his disciples with him, producing an unforgettable challenge to risk more, fear less, and act more boldly when urgent need stares us in the face.

Earlier this month, I joined a remarkable group of people—including many from this church—in a day of peaceful Mass Action protecting the Pequea Creek in southern Lancaster County.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the area, Pequea Creek runs through southern Lancaster County and into the Susquehanna River. Williams Gas Company recently installed inflatable dams & diverted the entire waterway to install a fracked-gas pipeline right through the creek bed, inflicting massive environmental damage.

Everyone participating in that action had a specific role to play. Some were in kayaks paddling up to the restricted work site. Some were leading songs. Some were serving as medics. I guess I drew the short straw: my job was to lock down with a friend to the giant, still-active excavator trenching through the creek.

It was a blazing hot day, 95-degrees. And police tempers were also running a little hot. When the state troopers finally dragged the two of us off that piece of equipment, I felt a lot of things—inside & out. But most of all, I felt grief.

Some date the Susquehanna River system back more than 250-million years. Think about that for a second. And yet a handful of cocky billionaires from Nowhere, Oklahoma, decided it was a good idea to obliterate the bedrock of this important Susquehanna tributary, just so they could turn a quick buck with yet another fossil fuel pipeline that will likely be obsolete in our children's lifetime.

An unspeakable violation was taking place against the most precious element on Earth: our water. Local elders, children, families & friends had gathered to bear witness & call out this absurd, suicidal destruction—and yet the state police were dragging away the Pequea defenders, in handcuffs, to ensure that the desecration of this Good Earth could continue as efficiently as possible.

Sometimes the suffering & injustice around us feels too large to tackle in any meaningful way. It's really easy to start wondering if *anything* we have to offer—the ridiculously small fish in our hands, the few bread crumbs we hold—can do anything more than give the opposition another chance to ridicule our quaint attempts at healing & hope.

But just when we feel discouraged, and start second-guessing our meager efforts to change the world, we hear Jesus say: “Stop counting the crowds. What’s that in your hands? Invite them all to sit down and eat.”

Please pray with me:

Jesus—who dares us to open our hands and offer what we have—help us find the courage to overcome the fear that we’re not ready to act, that we need more time, that the multitude is too large, that we don’t hold enough in our hands to make a difference.

Help us dare more, risk more, act sooner, hesitate less.

Amen.
