**Beyond Belief** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 6:24-35 Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 4, 2024

My father taught me, first how to fish, then how to fly fish, when I was a child. It didn’t take long for me to become obsessed with fishing. At an embarrassingly young age, I swapped cartoons for fishing shows on Saturday mornings. I started to tie my own flies, because I became increasingly in awe about the prospect of catching a really big fish on a fly I had tied.

And then, one day, it happened. I caught the big fish on a fly I had tied. I’d paint a picture for you, but it’s really a pretty standard fish story. But, that rainbow trout, in the half light of dusk, on the rocky banks of a stream, cutting deep through a Colorado canyon, as the cool of the evening descended, caught largely on accident while I was mostly just trying to get out some more line so I could start casting: it’s a core memory now.

There was a good 3 years between the time I got really excited about flyfishing and tying my own flies, until that fateful evening in Colorado. And in that time I grew pretty discouraged: it’s fair to say that at several points, I believed I’d never catch a big fish on a fly I’d tied. But it finally happened.

It took the actual happening of the thing for me to trust that it might happen again. And what I found on the other side of that experience was, and is, about so much more than a picture and a memory of a fish and a river. It was and is about so much more than a love of fishing or even the outdoors. What I found was and is a invitation: an invitation to deepening connection to creation; a growing regard for the interdependence of life; and a budding sense of awe about our infinitely small but beautiful place in an immense universe.

The portion of John’s Gospel we just heard comes right after Jesus has, somehow, miraculously, fed thousands of people. The crowds followed Jesus first because he was known as a healer. For him to then feed a multitude without spending a single denarii meant he was someone worth sticking close to. Free food. Free healthcare. True freedom indeed!

In today’s Scripture we hear that the people want more. Of course they do! But as Scott mentioned last week, the true miracle in the feeding story doesn’t hinge on the need to believe in the magical fabrication of bread and fish out of thin air. It is equally miraculous, and indeed counterculturally consequential, to believe that thousands of people might actually slow down long enough to realize that some of them have more food than they need; that others have less than they need, but in the end, when everyone shares their food with everyone else, they experience what it means to have an abundance of food.

What matters is that food materializes; how it happens, and what we believe about how it may or may not have happened, doesn’t really matter. What matters to the author of John is that Jesus’ followers recognize him as the source of this material abundance.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Feeding, healing, and resurrection stories are common among our four canonical gospels. It doesn’t really matter whether you believe that they happened in the literal manner they’re recounted to us. What matters is that encountering Jesus as God’s chosen, God’s anointed, God’s son comes with a transformation of the very real, very material world. Food, and more than is needed, materializes, somehow, to feed everyone. Healing, that restores people to physical and social wellbeing, happens, somehow. Empty tombs, strangers breaking bread and reinterpreting Scripture, not recognizing and then recognizing Jesus in a new but different way, happens, somehow, and fundamentally changed the hearts and minds and lives of decades, then centuries, and now millenia of people.

Our ritual encounters—the sacraments of baptism and communion—involve real water, real bread, real juice, and real people. When we proclaim through our words and our actions that God’s transformation is ongoing in our lives, what is in the balance isn’t so much belief, but actual, material welfare for you and me, for all of us, all creation.

No matter what you believe does or doesn’t happen when you participate in communion, you are invited to take literal bread, literal juice, and to be literally transformed. Whatever you believe about how this sacrament works, you are offered the presence of the risen Christ, and you are invited to continue transforming your life according to the way of Jesus.

If the people seeking more bread from Jesus wish for more bread always, they need only continue acting as they most likely did before: sharing what they had with everyone, living more deeply into the reality that there’s almost always more than enough to go around. As scholar Stephen Patterson reminded us back in April. the Greek word that gets translated “belief,” here and in most places in our New Testament, is more fully understood as trust: it is an orientation of faithfulness toward others, toward ourselves.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Trust implies relationship. Transformation, salvation, following the way of Jesus, isn’t primarily the result of the quiet thoughts in our heads or the emotional tugs in our hearts during this single hour of our week. God knows we hope these moments help! But no, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that it is mostly the trajectory of our actions, the causes to which we give our time and talent and treasure, the amount of God’s love we receive and allow to flow through us and into the world during the remaining 167 hours of our week. This is where the work of God’s inbreaking realm continues.

When we participate in communion, we testify that we believe in the power of the risen Christ to move us beyond our belief, and to be part of making our world in the image of this ritual: that all are welcome to partake of food, no matter whether we paid for it or not. We proclaim that our lives will testify to this, that we won’t always get it right, and that’s why we’ll keep coming back, like the people in today’s Scirpture, to remind ourselves of the way we follow. Jesus’ way. The way that dispels the illusion of not enough, transforming it into the reality of more than enough.

I can’t tell you that I have endured as a person of the Christian way primarily because of words I’ve uttered or beliefs I’ve held. I can’t tell you that I have once and for all resolved the dilemmas of life through my commitment to this religion. Because the words I’ve uttered, the beliefs I’ve held, and life’s dilemmas continue to change for me.

My trust in this sacred way has mostly to do with what our sacraments remind us about what is really real: that the free food offered in communion and the free community offered in baptism invite us, regularly and freely, to join our lives to God’s ongoing transformation of the world.

My trust in this sacred way has mostly to do with the material realities of this world: that there is more than enough food, clothing, shelter, and community to go around, if we simply and radically share our portions, as societies and individuals. That, as societies and individuals, we incarnate our beliefs about both heaven and hell in this very moment based on how we receive and how share the material needs of life.

My trust in this sacred way has to do with the reality I suddenly became more deeply aware of, in real time, on the banks of a real river in Colorado, because I began to see how I was being invited deeper into life, and life abundant.

In what, in whom do you trust? And is it transforming you for God’s always in-breaking realm?

For the encounters with Jesus that move us beyond belief, no matter what we believe, into the material rhythms of God’s love, I say thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Karoline M. Lewis, *John-Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.hohchurch.org/worship-music/live-streaming-house-hope-church/>, 4th Sunday of Easter, broadcasted 4/21/24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)