

You may or may not know this, but John, the gospel we read from today, is a different sort of gospel. Out of the four accounts of Jesus's life, from Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's Gospel is the most DIVINE. That means there's no baby born in Bethlehem or long list of ancestors on a family tree. Instead, the first words of the first chapter announcing the new thing of Jesus Christ: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

There are no parables in John. You know, parables – those down-home stories, thoughtful riddles, based on agrarian life revealing the Kingdom. It's in Luke or Mark, we get the Lost Sheep or a Mustard Seed story, but not here. Instead of the subtle stories with wise comparisons, in John's Gospel, there are lengthy discourses with I AM statements. Also, cool, but definitely a different vibe when Jesus says: "I am the Bread of Heaven" says Jesus. "I am the door of the sheepfold" "I am the good shepherd." "I am the way and the truth and the life."

And the miracles in John? The miracles just aren't quite the same. First off, there is the feast at Cana where Jesus' miracle is turning water into wine. That's not in the other gospels, so it points to something different going on here from the start. And for his last miracle- his ultimate act on the way to Holy Week- Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. This is the final and climatic point of his ministry. In other gospels, the focus is on cleansing the temple. But in John, we see him granting eternal life to a friend. And even in this passage that we read for today- the feeding of the 5,000 - this familiar story is a little bit different in John.

Now, this IS the only miracle story to be found in all four gospels. So, there are- of course- similarities. For example, all of the stories show the disciples incredulity when confronted with the task of feeding the large crowd with paltry supplies. Three out of the four gospels mention the **green grassy areas** on which the crowds will

sit as they wait for their meal. All of the gospels emphasize the FEAST that is prepared. After Jesus gives thanks and passes the food around, the writers point to its abundance. They had as much as they wanted! They all ate till they were satisfied! There were baskets of leftovers to be had! (Now you see why this is a good passage to read right before Thanksgiving – all those leftovers!)

With so many similarities, the differences really stand out. And the biggest change in the Gospel of John is in the source of the materials. In most gospels, the provenance of the food is not so clear. It kind of magically appears from within the disciples baskets. The focus then is not the origin of the food, but on the worry of the disciples that they don't have MORE. But here in John's Gospel, in this feast story, the material made miraculous comes from the hands of a little boy. In John's account, it is a child who shares what it is he has, a child who through Christ feeds the folks on the grass.

How is this child wrapped up in the theme of glory and divinity in John's gospel? **Because** scholars point out that there isn't much talk about children in other places. There is no sweet story of Jesus welcoming little children. In John, Jesus never holds up a child as a model of the humble status necessary for greatness in the kingdom of God. He doesn't compare the way one welcomes a child to the way one welcomes him. Those well-known and beloved stories are in OTHER gospels, but not John. There aren't even healings of young children and no real references to established family units. So then, what do we make of the small child who inaugurates this amazing feast in the boldest gospel of all?

Looking more closely at the text, we see that the scripture says Jesus TAKES the loaves from the child. It's not hostile or anything, but because the boy originally has the food, John's gospel is clear that Jesus gets hold of it. The Greek verb used is a not an aggressive word- Jesus didn't *SEIZE* or *REMOVE* the food. Don't

worry, Jesus is still on the side of the oppressed in John. He didn't steal the kids' lunch! But it also isn't a passive verb either. There's another word the writer could have used to say, "the boy offered the loaves." This other word would have emphasized Jesus' reception of the food as a gift. But that's not the word choice here.

No, in this situation the Greek verb TOOK means something else. It's different from an unfair taking or an open arms receiving. It's a soft verb that looks not at the action it describes, but rather at **what you do with what you somehow got**. When Jesus "took the loaves" the verb choice means he somehow get a hold of them. The focus is not on the action but instead on the miracle that comes next. And the child is important here because when Jesus takes the bread, the whole crowd becomes a family as they sit down to a miraculous feast in the good green grass.

To explain further, there are a few more instances of this particular verb in the gospel- when the woman anoints Jesus for burial, she **took** the oil. So, she gets hold of this costly perfume and THEN washes Jesus's feet. The verb is there too when "Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." Somehow, Pilate wound up with Jesus- after shipping him off to Herod, after sending him back to the crowd- he tried to wash his hands of pronouncing the death sentence on this man. But then Pilate took him, somehow got him, and THEN Pilate had him flogged. This verb choice shows us is not so much about the action- the taking or receiving- but it's about what comes next. The verb points forward to what you do with what you've somehow got. Both the woman and Pilate somehow got ahold of Jesus' body. One anoints Jesus with precious oil. The other orders so many lashes.

One of the last instances of this verb in John is also in the context of family. In the passage, we see not a boy necessarily, but a son. I'll read it from John 19 verse 29- "Meanwhile standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the

wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here, is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple **took** her into his own home.” The gospel writer says, it’s not important how they got ahold of one another, it’s what they do with what they’ve got in this newly ordered family of Christ.

At our recent Session retreat, we had a robust discussion on the essential function of the church universal - a very impressive Session if I do say so myself! We also talked about our particular and personal ties to Covenant. And what filtered to the top in both discussions was that church matters, and THIS church matters, as a place of belonging. It is a home where you feel welcomed and encouraged and loved with whatever you bring to the table.

One elder told me that a few years ago under Pastor Leigh Campbell Taylor, the group talked about alternative names for the congregation. The prompt was: What we might call ourselves if Covenant were to be renamed? What name would really communicate who we are? She said she came up with “Small Church Big Mission.” A different elder remembered the theme song from Cheers, and said “The Church Where Everybody Knows Your Name.”

In our lives, we belong to multiple types of families. We have our biological families, the ones we are born into, and our chosen families, the ones we create through deep connections and shared experiences. AND, we are part of a larger family of faith, united by our beliefs and values. It is within these diverse and sometimes unconventional groups that we find ourselves intertwined with one another.

Our families may be a motley crew, composed of individuals from various professions, ages, and stages of life. Yet, we set aside our

differences so that we may enjoy the feast. Even across political divides, we find a common ground, a space where love and understanding can flourish.

It is not the circumstances that bring us together that truly matter, but rather how we choose to embrace and nurture the connections we have. We have the power to create a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love within our families, regardless of their composition. It is through our actions, our words, and our genuine care for one another that we can sit down in the good green grass to enjoy the feast that the Lord has prepared.

Friends, in this life and world, we've somehow got hold of each other as brothers and sisters, as beloved siblings in Christ. We are an unlikely human family. But what matters is not how we got here. What matters is what we do with what we've somehow got.

To God be the Glory! Time without end. Amen.