

**“The Secret of Life”**  
**John 6:1-15; Malachi 3:1-2a, 6-12**

On September 28, 1972, Westminster Presbyterian Church dedicated its new gymnasium and kitchen. Those of you who have been members more than sixteen years will remember this structure. It sat about where the entry pavilion resides today. Back then a parking lot driveway ran between the educational building and the gym. This new gym and kitchen intentionally recalled the architecture of the sanctuary, its support beams resembling the sanctuary’s pillars and its central window being made of the same stained glass.

Yet, the path to its construction had not been smooth. A church member had generously offered \$100,000 to build the structure. But, further research, along with the purchase of a needed plot of land, determined that the cost of the project would be closer to \$300,000. In this period, the church was already experiencing some turmoil, so there were many questions whether this was a wise move, especially in light of the mortgage that would now be required. But the project went forward and when concluded provided areas that could enhance the church’s ministry.

And that is when this church made a not entirely logical or seemingly advantageous decision. It allowed Meals on Wheels, which had began four years earlier when no other church would step forward to house it, to move into the new expanded kitchen. Meals on Wheels would dominate the kitchen area for the next eighteen years. Its five day a week usage precluded any expansion of a church hospitality ministry. Plus, the large front room of the building, where many believed a youth ministry could be housed with couches, chairs, a television, and maybe even a ping pong or pool table, became the Meals on Wheels office.

Essentially, the church built a new building, took on a significant mortgage in a turbulent time, and then hamstrung the expansion of its ministries by allowing Meals on Wheels to take over the space. Any church member could have logically, and persuasively, argued that permitting Meals on Wheels to dominate this new building was not a good decision.

And yet, even though after twenty-two years, Meals on Wheels eventually left us in 1990, to this day we still see Meals on Wheels as one of the signature original ministries of this church. To this day, we take pride in the fact that when no one else would open their doors to them, this church opened its space and its heart to what is now a county-wide ministry.

When Meals on Wheels resided at Westminster, our members were especially active in the delivery of lunches. Every child who entered that

gym to play basketball, every church member who attended a church dinner there, every neighborhood person who came for a community meeting was immediately confronted with the knowledge that this church placed a premium on feeding the hungry, caring for the least of these. The presence of Meals on Wheels was a constant, visible reminder, a symbol, of who we wanted to be as a church, how we wished our members to see the world, and Westminster's calling.

In some manner, the idea of what Meals on Wheels was doing, feeding the hungry, became ingrained within the very sinew, bone, and blood of this congregation. One of the reasons our yearly budget carries almost a half a million dollars for missions is because of our experience with Meals on Wheels. Yet, no one could have known or visualized that in 1972. Housing them was not a decision of logic or reality, but of faith and calling.

In our scripture, we discover another decision that must be made, and it also pits logic and reality against faith and calling. The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Jesus is standing by the Sea of Galilee. As word spreads of his healing of the sick, the valley begins to fill with people. Seeing the multitude, and understanding their needs, Jesus says to Philip, "Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?" Undoubtedly gazing on this horde of people, Philip, likely trying not to sound too patronizing replies, "Six months of wages wouldn't buy enough for each of them to get even a bite." Then Andrew approaches and says, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But that isn't going to do much with so many people."

Jesus tells them to have the people sit down. Then he takes the boy's food, blesses it, and passes it out to those there. Everyone eats their fill, and the disciples collect twelve baskets of leftovers. When the people realize this miracle, they want to forcibly take Jesus and proclaim him king. But he escapes to the mountain by himself.

A Sunday School teacher asked little Johnny, "Johnny, do you think Noah did a lot of fishing when he was on the ark?"

"No," replied Johnny, "How could he, with just two worms?"

Philip and Andrew didn't see how 5000 men could be fed with just five barley loaves of bread and two fish.

One of the reasons the feeding of the 5000 is so well known today is that it readily coincides with the human experience, and especially ours this morning. For the Christian, its pattern, its decisions, are common ones.

The first movement of the drama is what I like to call the economic reality question. Seeing the multitude, and knowing they need to be fed,

Jesus asks Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” It was logical to ask Philip. He hailed from nearby Bethsaida, so he would naturally know where to purchase food. But rather than answering Jesus’ question, Philip’s reply points to the absurdity of Jesus’ request.

“Jesus, why are you asking me that? Look at all these people? Six months of paychecks wouldn’t give each of them hardly a bite.” Otherwise, “we don’t have enough money to make even a dent in this.”

Then Andrew chimes in, “Hey, Jesus, there’s a boy here with five barley loaves of bread and two fish. But, of course, that isn’t going to help with all these people.”

The economic reality question. The question that really wants to begin with, “Are you just stupid? Don’t you understand the situation here?” Jesus asked them for possibilities, all they could see were problems.

Most of us live our lives confined by the parameters of the reality question. Whether it is our jobs, our families, our faith, our resources, we allow ourselves to be dictated, controlled, by what we deem to be logical, rational, safe. Philip and Andrew were not bad people. They were not unintelligent, mean, or even uncaring. But they allowed their actions, their dreams, their future, to be confined and controlled by the limits of how they viewed their situation.

Plato once said, “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when [people] are afraid of the light.” Like Philip and Andrew, do you and I live our lives cowering in the dark, suppressed by the reality we see around us, or with faith reaching for the light of God?

But then, a little boy steps forward with five barley loaves of bread and two fish. Likely the boy had told his mother he was going to see this miracle worker and she packed him a lunch. But, believe it or not, understanding his lunch is important to comprehending this story.

Note that the text says he possessed five “barley” loaves of bread. Barley bread was the food of the poor. If he had gone to the Fresh Market for his lunch, he would have only found smoother textured, better tasting wheat bread. The barley bread designates where the boy and his family were on the socio-economic scale. Also, the original Greek word used to describe his two fish signifies not two fresh, whole fish, which would have been expensive, but a fish relish. Galilee was actually known all over the Roman Empire for this fish relish. Pickled fish were taken and made into a spread for bread. Think of it in terms of something like a poor man’s peanut butter.

Now, what is interesting is that this boy sees the same economic reality as Philip and Andrew. He doesn't need to be able to count very high to recognize there are a lot of people there. And remember, the text tells us there were 5000 men present, so there were probably almost as many women and children. Yet, looking out at those thousands of people, and then down at his five barley loaves and two fish that were for his lunch, and realizing that he has no guarantee he will get any food in return, the boy offers it to Jesus. Philip and Andrew, disciples and companions of Jesus, respond to the economic question with discouragement and fear, while the boy reacts with generosity.

When things look a little shaky, when there is still some uncertainty in the air, when confronted with a need that will cost you what you are holding in your hand, when Christ asks us to help feed others, do you and I respond with fear or generosity?

Two well-to-do Christians, a lawyer and a businessman, joined a party that was traveling around the world. In Korea one day, they saw, in a field by the side of the road, a boy pulling a simple plow, while an old man held the plow handles and directed it.

The lawyer was amused, and took a snapshot of the scene. "That's a curious picture! I suppose they are very poor," he said to the missionary, who was an interpreter and guide to the party.

"Yes," was the reply. "That is the family of Chi Noui. When their church was being built they were eager to give something to it, but they had no money; so they sold their only ox and gave their money to the church. This spring they are pulling the plow themselves."

The lawyer and the businessman by his side were silent for some moments. Then the businessman said, "That must have been a real sacrifice."

"They did not call it that," said the missionary. "They thought it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell."

Do you and I view our gifts as sacrifices or blessings?

"When they were satisfied, [Jesus] 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."

This story carries no subtlety. Philip and Andrew, disciples, those closest to Jesus, cannot get beyond the economic reality that confronts them. It is obvious to them there are too many people and too little money to feed them. A boy, seeing the same reality, still offers to Jesus his lunch, five

barley loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus takes the boy's offering, blesses it, feeds the people, and twelve baskets of food are left over.

Jesus can take an individual's generosity and produce a miracle. Let me repeat that because it is the teaching of this passage and a constant pattern in human existence: Jesus can take an individual's generosity and produce a miracle. That miracle occurs when those resources filter out to feed the hungry at the Samaritan House food bank, help educate adults at United Ministries, heal the sick at the Embangweni Hospital in Malawi, provide a pastor to administer communion to Westminster's shut-ins. Money you give to Jesus touches the lives of thousands of people all over the world.

But it also produces another miracle, the one that occurs within us. Just like the story tells us, generosity produces abundance. It is the secret of life. Generosity in love, in friendship, in caring, in money, produces abundance. Those who give, freely, graciously, generously receive twelve basketfuls in return.

For most of us, as for Philip and Andrew, that principle, the secret of life, is counterintuitive. Common sense tells us to view reality with the cold, hard eye of logic. We need to hold on, hoard, love, give, and think conservatively, rationally, logically. "I see too many needs for my time, for my money." "Where will I get my lunch?" But when the boy offered his bread and fish, twelve basketfuls came back in return. Generosity produces abundance.

Did you know that the African impala can jump to a height of ten feet in the air and cover a distance greater than thirty feet? And yet, when you go to a zoo to see them, these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure with only a three foot wall. That is because these animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will land.

So many of us are captured within the prison of emotional, spiritual, and financial fear because we cannot see where our faith and generosity would land us, and thereby we miss the abundance of God's blessings within our own lives.

#### "The Secret of Life"

Today is Stewardship Sunday. This week, you will receive a commitment card in the mail. We ask you to fill it out and return with it next Sunday when we will place them on the communion table, dedicating our resources and ourselves to God's work.

Our scripture today is a fitting one for our time. The economy is getting better, but it is slow. Like Philip and Andrew we see a whole lot of

people out there needing to be fed. And when we view the economic reality of today and then look at our five barley loaves and two fish, our first reaction is to hold on more tightly to what we possess. But to do so will most certainly choke the ability of God to work in us and through us. Whether it is time, talents, or money, only generosity produces abundance. The biblical tithe, giving ten percent of our income, is God's method for blessing us.

Our church budget this year remains the same as last year. Last year, for the first time in many years, we did not reach our pledge goal. That was understandable with people uncertain about their jobs. But for most of us, that situation is now more stable. Even though the church budget has not been raised, we still need a six percent increase in pledges to reach our goal.

I ask you to give generously, raise your pledge, offer your five loaves and two fish. You will not be sorry you did.

Generosity produces abundance. Are you ready? Are you willing? To discover this secret in your life?

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