

John 6:1-15
The Nothing Kingdom
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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It was 84 years ago today...considered by some to be the most destructive, catastrophic day in the history of American agriculture. The farmers of the Midwest, already suffering under a season-long draught rose this morning in 1931 to see a cloud in the west, a cloud that seemed to run from the foothills of North Dakota to the plains of Kansas. It was not the rain they needed. It was locusts....The greatest swarm of locusts in our recorded history. And by the end of the day tomorrow, crops across the Midwest were not simply destroyed, they were gone. The farmers, charged with feeding a financially struggling America, were left with nothing. No crops, no money and no hope.

It seems appropriate then that today is a day when the text invites us to contemplate Nothing. Or more correctly, whether if it's possible to make something from nothing.

As we make a mid-year shift into the Gospel of John for a few weeks, we find ourselves in very familiar territory... a story tradition has called the Feeding of the 5000.

I say it is very familiar because this is the most common story across the four gospels. If you read the four gospel accounts of Jesus resurrection on Easter Sunday, you come away a bit boggled by how different the strains of memory are about this most important event in the history of God's sojourn with humanity...but the exact opposite is true of this story. Other than the resurrection, it is the only story about Jesus that appears in all four of the gospels...and in its key components...the loaves, the fishes, the number of people served, the foolishness of the disciples...even the verbs that describe Jesus' action...took, blessed, gave...are the same in all four versions.

Why is this the most corroborated story in the New Testament? Perhaps because it is the story that foreshadows Jesus' final meal with the disciples when he will again, same verbs....take, bless and give them bread. Perhaps it is because in this miracle, Jesus' divinity is so clearly on display. Like the God who created the world out of nothing, Jesus is faced with nothing...or almost nothing...a couple of loaves and fish...and there are thousands who need to be fed. Other than demonstrating that the disciples desperately needed a Fellowship Committee, maybe this miracle of feeding is a call to remember what Jesus was all about.

And I'm not talking about doing miracles. That's where we get stuck in this story, isn't it? We find it difficult to imagine that there has been some miraculous manipulation of energy and matter so that all of the sudden, where there was nothing, now there is

more than enough for all. While some have persuasively argued that the real miracle was the hospitality that Jesus inspired in others to share food they had hidden away just for themselves, there's nothing in the text to suggest that...And I want to suggest that perhaps it misses the point.

I want to suggest that exactly HOW what happened out on the field that day isn't all that important...what is important is what happened. The people were fed. Something was made from nothing...so that all could be fed. Jesus sees to the needs of the people.

Making something from nothing, making a way where there is no way in order to meet the needs of the people is nothing new actually. God's been doing it throughout scripture...from stories as large as creation itself to intimate family histories like Ruth and Naomi, who were without family or hope until Ruth was inspired to follow Naomi into a foreign land. It's even there ... at the beginning of Jesus' story...when an unmarried pregnant girl with no power, no social position, and no right to live under Hebraic law becomes mother of the savior of the world.

As Nadia Bolz Weber, the tattooed occasionally curse-word dropping Lutheran preacher whose book *Pastrix* was all the rage a couple of years ago reminds us. Nothing is God's favorite raw material.

The Reverend Linda Wygant can tell you all about it. About a decade or so ago she was working in the admissions office of McCormick Seminary and had just completed her master gardener training. Hoping to find ways to integrate this new passion into her ministry, Linda began a time of discernment...and began with the realization that if she was going to come up with something, it had to start with the reality that she had limited, really no economic resources.

But she had an idea...an idea that had its roots in the Eucharist...and so had its roots in this story which was that meals precursor...her idea...that the people needed to be fed...physically and spiritually. There are 800,000 people a year who face food insecurity at one time or another in Chicagoland and what if, Linda dreamed, what if regular folks could help feed them, not by raising money...but by raising food?

Ten years ago, urban gardens were still very exotic, and very few folks living on small lots with little available green space were growing their own vegetables, let alone growing for others. Starting with literally nothing...Linda recruited three Presbyterian Churches on the Southwest Side to put in gardens and encourage members to create high-yield, raised-bed urban gardens to grow vegetables, greens and herbs for distribution at local food pantries. Statistically the vast majority of food available in food pantries is highly processed, high in sugar, fat and salt ... and fresh food can dramatically increase the nutritional value of a bag of food-pantry food.

From those three churches, Share the Harvest has grown to include 40 institutional growing partners—including the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry

Learning Garden—and faith communities from seven denominations and one of the largest mosques in the Midwest. In addition, hundreds of individual family gardeners are raising thousands of pounds of tomatoes, squash, beets, greens, cucumbers, green beans, mushrooms, eggplant and many other nutrient-rich fresh foods distributed to food pantries weekly from late May to early October each year. The growing program has expanded into creating simple, tasty recipes that can be provided with the food so that those who are less experienced with fresh food can more effectively use the Share the Harvest bounty.

The story is similar on a larger scale after the devastation...the nothingness of the locust swarm in the Midwest. Faced with nothing, people in Washington, in state capitals, and on the farms put their heads together, realizing this was a chance for a new start...and from that horrible summer day in 1931 was born the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Farm Security Act, the Soil Conservation Service and even the Rural Electrification Administration. From nothing, a nation responded and today, though it is far from perfect, the breadbasket of America is feeding the world.

In his satirical novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has his villain, Uncle Screwtape, say this: “Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why....”

But that's only true if Nothing is a place we go to and stay...

Jesus' actions today are a declaration that Nothing is a great place to start...a place to encounter need in its rawest form...and seek to meet those needs.

But what does it mean for us, we for whom nothingness is not a common state of being?

Well, first, it helps us give language to something profound. That God is already at work making something of nothing all around us if we just stop and look...

Think about it for a moment. Why do you love your children? Is it because of something they did, or because at some mystical moment in your past, out of nowhere, from nothing, a love was born that you cannot explain...a fierce, protective, hopeful love that springs from nowhere...Something wonderful from nothing.

And so we can celebrate that...but I'm convinced there is something else here we can hold onto today...something about this Jesus.

Did you notice what happens after Jesus feeds the people? They want to make him King. It makes perfect sense. In First Century Palestine, like in most of the Greco-Roman world, the people lived in a socio-political system that was based almost entirely upon patronage.

Your only hope of survival was to be a part of a household. The entire social system was the ultimate pyramid scheme. The one with the power and the wealth was

on the top. He or she would provide safety, security, food and shelter to those below, who would do the same for those below them on and on and on down to the peasants who would sweep the floors, work in the fields or tend the cattle. Everyone had a place ...a place dependent on what you did for those above you, a place where rewards were generally the gifts and favors you got from those below you.

And at the very top was the King. And seeing that he had provided food for more than a city's worth of food...the people naturally saw him as one deserving of a place in their patronage kingdom...And Jesus wanted no part in it.

He didn't feed the people so they would do things for him. He didn't feed the people so they would believe. He didn't feed the people so they would DO anything. He fed the people so they would be fed. He mustered whatever powers he had—powers to inspire or powers to transform energy into matter...either way you want to look at it—he mustered those powers for the good of those who needed what he could provide. He would rather reign as the sovereign of the Nothing Kingdom...that one based on power, wealth and patronage.

So what does THAT mean for us? Hopefully it can give us perspective for the six and a half days a week when we aren't all gathered in this building...reminding us, who spend much of our time in Caesar's world, that that is not the world that defines us....that sets our priorities...No...we are citizens of the Kingdom of Nothing...where we are met in our deepest needs and fed grace, hope and love...where we are commissioned to be heralds of the one who, in love, makes something, makes a whole new world, of nothing...a place where having been fed, we are inspired to go out from here to use the power we have to transform those nothing places we encounter...together with the Spirit who is already at work there...until there is a bountiful harvest of hope, justice and peace for all. Thanks be to God.