

THE MULTIPLICATION

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This is the fourth installment in a four year Lenten preaching series working our way through the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. We started with Matthew in 2015, Mark in '16, Luke last year, bringing us in 2018 to the Gospel According to John.

One of the particular fascinations of the fourth gospel is to compare and contrast with the preceding three. To repeat. It's thought that Mark's account was actually the first written, and that Matthew and Luke incorporated much of Mark's material into their own, expanding on some of his narratives, adding new material they thought important to share. The fancy word for the fusion of Matthew, Mark and Luke: The Synoptic Gospels.

John comes out of what would seem to be a very different set of experiences and traditions. As an example: Following Jesus' baptism, Mark gives a bare bones account of Jesus going into the Judean wilderness, one of the most desolate places on the planet, spending forty days with the wild beasts, tempted by Satan. Those forty days are the template for the season of Lent. Matthew and Luke greatly expand on Mark's account, including Satan's menu of temptations. John, in contrast, makes no mention of the forty days. If we were going by John alone, there'd be no season of Lent.

As to Jesus' baptism itself, John is content to tell us of John the Baptizer's after-the-fact report: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him... And I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Pause to note: John 1:28 reads: "This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. A little Bible geography: In two weeks, we'll be with Jesus in Bethany, raising Lazarus from the dead. That's a different Bethany, just over the hill from Jerusalem. Bethany across the Jordan would have been located at the place where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, said body of water being every bit as desolate as the name implies.

What was the Baptizer doing out here? The dominant religious parties of Roman-occupied Judea were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These were Jerusalem's equivalent of Republicans and Democrats, vying for influence.

There was a third party, the Essenes, who had decided Jerusalem was hopelessly corrupt and withdrawn to the Judea desert, establishing a community called Qumron—the ruins being of great interest to archeologists.

You've heard, perhaps of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have contributed so much to modern Biblical scholarship? These were discovered in a cave out here, surely deposited for safe keeping by the Essenes.

No fancy vestments and honor-seeking for these guys. John the Baptizer is said to have clothed himself in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, living on a diet of locusts and wild honey. If the Baptizer was doing his thing out here, he was surely operating out of Essene spirituality—and it's in this vicinity, yea, spiritual context, that Jesus himself was baptized.

This is interesting. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus calling his first disciples up north, at the Sea of Galilee, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Not so in the fourth gospel. As John tells it, Jesus recruited his first disciples, our namesake Andrew among them, from the Baptizer's Dead Sea entourage.

The 4th century guys who put the Bible together sometimes get a bad rap. To hear folks talk, you'd think they were in some kind of conspiracy of monolithic teaching. If that was the case, you'd think they would have scrubbed John to bring his book more into line with the first three. As it was, the church fathers were content to put John's book in the same library as the others. I'm glad they did. Be clear on this, as we near Easter, the quartet is of one mind on what mattered most: Jesus was crucified, dead, buried and on the third day rose again. That's THE essential.

John Chapter 3 begins with Jesus taking his recruits up north, to his home region of the Galilee, attending a wedding in the village of Cana. As one who has developed something of an aversion to the

21st century wedding circuit (taking lip off bridesmaids is NOT in my job description), I would note that Jesus was not the officiant. For that matter, nowhere in the scripture is there an account of any of the apostles having presided over a wedding ceremony.

Anyway, the wedding at Cana is thought to be the occasion of Jesus' first miracle. The host had run out of wine. That was embarrassing. Not that Jesus was in any hurry to get involved; it was his mama's idea that he change water into wine. Good stuff, it would seem, as the steward compliments the bridegroom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

FYI: Methodists of another era were at the forefront of the Prohibition movement. Preaching against alcohol while serving wine at communion didn't hardly seem right. A leading Methodist named Welch developed what we know as grape juice as a substitute for wine at communion. To this day, while we will speak of wine in the liturgy, what is actually shared is Brother Welch's product.

Not that Methodists are necessarily teetotalers. The apostle Paul himself advised his protégé Timothy to take a little wine for his ailing stomach, and the original Methodist, John Wesley, is quoted as saying "wine is the noblest cordial of nature." A byword among Methodists: Moderation.

That said, some of my greatest heartaches as a pastor have been occasioned by the helplessness of seeing good people destroyed by addiction to drink. Alcoholism is no respecter of class, gender, race or nation.

I'm particularly remembering one of the most brilliant men I ever knew, a scientific researcher at one of the top universities in the nation, the picture of intellect and dignity—until he took a drink. In what turned out to be his last year of life, he was in a revolving door of thirty-day programs, lasting a day or two before he was back at it, dying way before his time. For the sake of him and others I have known for whom one drink was one too many, I'm happy to be serving Welch's in our communion.

Anyway, as John tells it, Jesus then goes back south for Passover in Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark and Luke have Jesus in Jerusalem but the one time; him riding into town on the back of the donkey as people greeted him with palm branches and Hosannas. John, in contrast, has Jesus making three visits to the Big Apple. On this first occasion, Jesus is scandalized to see the temple taken over by commercial interests. He takes a whip of cords and tells the buyers and sellers to vamoose, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

I should be quick to add, the same narrative is shared in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but whereas the Synoptic Trio have it right after Palm Sunday, John places it in Chapter 3. Of course, it’s possible Jesus drove the moneychangers out once, came back a couple of years later and found them back at it. However you read it, Jesus seems to have had some definite ideas on what was okay and what wasn’t in the House of the Lord.

It was on this pilgrimage to Jerusalem that Jesus had the famous conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the aforementioned Pharisee party, John himself commenting, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life.” Nicodemus has a key role in our Easter message, “All You Need Is Love”: “He’s a real nowhere man...”

Chapter 3 ends with the disciples of John the Baptist concerned that this Jesus is eclipsing him. Far from being threatened, John rejoices that the Messiah is come. The soon-to-be-retired pastor can identify with verse 30, John saying of the new guy, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Chapter 4 begins with Jesus making his way back north to the Galilee, the route taking him through Samaria, where “Jesus Met The Woman At The Well.”

Note here: We talked last weekend about John himself having been historically presented in a rather androgynous manner, intended, perhaps, to make him particularly relatable to women.

Surely this figures in: John's Jesus consistently shows compassion for gals in tough straits.

Best known, I suppose is the women caught in adultery, another narrative exclusive to John, found in chapter 8, Jesus famously saying, "Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone."

But the Woman at the Well also surely informs what is historically perceived as John's feminist slant to Jesus.

To repeat, Jesus' route took him through Samaria. Passing Jacob's Well around noon, Jesus was "tired out by his journey" and sat down by the well, while his disciples went into town to buy food. You needed a rope and bucket to draw from this well and Team Jesus seemed not to be so equipped. This Samaritan woman comes along; draws from the well; Jesus asks her, "Give me a drink."

As John tells us—and we know this from plenty of other places in the Bible—good Jews didn't have anything to do with mixed-race Samaritans, much less Samaritan women. But that seems not to have bothered Jesus. If she will in fact give him water from her bucket, he has something to offer in exchange: "living water."

Jesus knows her story. Having a checkered past and disreputable present, she's out here by herself in the heat of the day because respectable women of her town wouldn't want to associate with her. But Jesus did. He engages her in conversation, saying, "Everyone who drinks from this water (the water from the well) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

To make a long story short: she believed, went into town, shared her experience with such conviction that folks went to see and hear this Jesus for themselves; the consensus: "We know that this truly is the Savior of the world."

Next up: A series of healing narratives. In my current circumstance, the account beginning in the first verse of chapter five is of particular interest. Jesus is back in Jerusalem. The walled city

was entered through “gates.” When some of us were in Jerusalem in 2011, we came in through the Damascus Gate. John chapter 5 starts as The Sheep Gate, thought to be the portal for sheep and other animals destined for sacrifice at the temple. Situated by the Sheep Gate was the Pool of Bethesda, the waters thought to have curative power. We’re told, “In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.”

When I was diagnosed with this herniated disc in early January, I wasn’t too concerned. Give me a cortisone shot and put me back in the game. Only to find myself dragging around a left leg that seemed more useless with each passing day. Nancy had noticed the leg having the appearance of actually beginning to actually shrink; when the doctor said I was running the risk of permanent nerve damage, I thought of the question Jesus asked one of the invalids at the pool, who, for whatever reason, had been lying there for 38 years without ever managing to get into the water, “Do you want to be made well?”

You’d be surprised, I think, at how many people might equivocate on that. As it was, this guy had a built in excuse for most anything that might be asked of him: “Oh, I can’t be expected do this or that. I’m lame, you see.” It’s a question I’ve often asked of people in my pastoral ministry, folks suffering from addictions, depression, self-defeating behaviors: Do you want to be made well? Because there is help available. But you can’t just sit there and wallow in it. Healing begins with the affirmation, “Yes, I want to be made well.”

As for me, I most definitely want to be well, and the effects of the surgery were not unlike that experienced by this guy, Jesus telling him to “Stand up and walk.” As I regain strength every day, I give thanks to the surgeon, and I give thanks to the nurses and technicians--and I give thanks to God, seeing the medical advances of our time as downright miraculous, the Lord working through the medical team to restore me to health.

FYI: In the course of my ministry, some of the strongest, most committed Christians I have known have been physicians and health care givers.

Oops. Jesus had healed the aforementioned dude on the Sabbath. That’s a no-no. Moses told them so. The religious leaders

got in Jesus' face. Jesus did not back down. The self-described righteous search the scriptures, thinking eternal life will be found there--which was all swell and good, as far as that goes. "But," said Jesus, "I know that you do not have the love of God in you."

As noted last weekend, John is credited with authorship of five entries in the New Testament: First his gospel; last the Book of Revelation; in between, three pastoral letters. Reading again from the first of these three letters, chapter 4, starting at verse 7:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

I have spent my adult life as what Sinclair Lewis termed "a professional good person." I know a lot of stuff. But searching the scriptures, I realized early on that it was people like me, the religious guys, who most passionately wanted Jesus out of the way.

I have long been painfully aware of the trap so common to religious leaders of any time and place: quick to see the speck in the eye of the other--maybe preaching against it in a sermon--while oblivious to the log in our own.

If I have not presented myself as a learned, polished pastor, some of that is intentional, as I truly fear falling into that sad category of those who have gained the world but lost their soul—professional good people of clergy stripe being particularly susceptible. What does it gain a preacher to have the largest congregation around and lose his or her soul? It's been challenging enough keeping tenuous hold on mine as it is.

As I said, the Easter sermon is a musical message, "All You Need Is Love." As I read the gospel, while love isn't necessarily all you need, without it, we ourselves are nowhere.

Bringing us to one of the rare narratives found in all four of the gospels: The Multiplication, better known as the loaves and fishes. Reading from John chapter 6, starting at verse 1.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.

Trivia question: Who was emperor in Rome concurrent with Jesus' public ministry? No, it was not Caesar Augustus. He'd been *numero uno* at the time of Jesus' birth, but died when Jesus would have been a teenager. And certainly not Julius Caesar; he'd been *et tu Bruted* forty years before Jesus was born. No, the incumbent Caesar, circa 30 AD, was a gloomy old dude named Tiberius.

Modern era tourists will be lodged in the town of Tiberius. Situated on the southwest bank of The Sea of Galilee, Tiberius had been founded circa 20 AD, as a Roman enclave, which is, I suppose, why his name had been attached to the sea, itself. Back to the book:

A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples.

When you see the word "mountain," in association with Jesus' ministry in the Galilee, don't think the Rockies; we're talking rolling hills of modest elevation.

As to where Jesus was sitting with the disciples, the traditional site is marked by The Church of the Multiplication, dating back to the 4th century, destroyed in 614 by the Persians, rediscovered by archaeologists in the early 20th century, the restored church inaugurated in 1984. In front of the altar, inlaid in the floor, is a mosaic representing two fishes and four loaves of bread, the mosaic itself dating to the 5th century.

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him...

Pause quickly: Our namesake, Andrew, gets more airtime in John's account than in the other three. Way back in Chapter one, John tells us it was Andrew who told his more famous brother, Simon Peter, that this Jesus was the real thing. In this instance, Andrew reports to Jesus:

"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he 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. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

There are all sorts of possible takeaways from this passage. Preaching through it at other times and places, I've sometimes talked about Jesus making maximum use of the resources at hand. I've known people and congregations that put a lot of energy into bemoaning what they didn't have in way of resources (We can't do this; can't do that...); whereas, in my experience, if we'll make the most of what we do have, the Lord is bound to bless the effort.

Frankly, we're counting on that in this StACK Center project. The long-time occupants of the 1995 Education wing vacated the premises last week. Renovation work is running full speed now. We've been upfront, I think, that there's some short-term financial risk involved, but a church that doesn't take some risks for the sake of Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ—in this instance, specifically children and families—can hardly expect to be blessed, can it?

We're moving forward in faith that the Lord will multiply our ministry!

But reading the passage this time around, what's been most on my heart is my preaching ministry. As I've said here on multiple occasions, I had only the vaguest idea of what I was getting into when I left the telephone company, saying, "Here I am, Lord, use me." I'd never preached a sermon in my life, anywhere, under any circumstances, before standing in the pulpit of Pattonsburg United Methodist in very rural northwest Missouri, the first Sunday in June, 1974.

All these years later, I remember I sort of had an idea what I might talk about the first three Sundays, but no clue as to what I'd do after that. It was kind of intimidating. And here I am, ready to retire, with this one frustration: I've got all these fragments of sermons left over, hundreds of ideas jotted down for future reference, but with time running out, will never get preached; new ideas popping up all the time.

Last weekend, we heard about this summer's Vacation Bible School, the theme "Shipwrecked," and I had a momentary flush of excitement, thinking on a sermon about Paul's experience of getting shipwrecked in Acts, only to be stopped by this thought: I'll likely be in Pennsylvania by then.

Whatever one may think about Bruce Davis as a preacher (and there have been many opinions), I don't know of anyone who has found it more gratifying. What a blessing it has been to spend my vocational life thinking on big ideas, the biggest idea, of all, of course: God. And, in turn, to share the fruits of this labor of love with you.

The loaves and fishes represents the high mark of Jesus' popular acclaim in the Galilee. The region is gripped in Jesus-mania, not unlike what we're seeing in Nebraska with Scott Frost. People were following everywhere he went. You might have thought Jesus would think this was really cool. You would be wrong.

Reading from John 6:26.

"Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

This kind of rubbed folks the wrong way. *You seem to be questioning our motives. Tell us, sir, what is it, exactly you want from us?* To which Jesus said:

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Excuse us. And who is it you think you are? When our ancestors were wandering those forty years in the desert, Moses produced bread from heaven. Don't recall Moses getting all grouchy with them.

Jesus said,

“Very truly, I tell you it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father, who gives you the bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Remember, Jesus had spoken in similar terms to the woman at the well, but whereas she believed, these folks got their noses all out of joint. *Wait a minute. We know this guy. He's the carpenter's boy. What's this “I came down from heaven” nonsense?*

Jesus was not backing down:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Huh?

“Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.”

OMG! One of the marks of a God-fearing Jew was adhering to dietary laws passed down from the days of Moses. At the top of the list: Thou shalt not ingest anything with blood in it. Jews ordered their steaks well-done, no pink in the middle. Now this guy is telling them to eat his flesh and drink his blood?

No wonder folks started saying, “I’m out of here.” Goodness, even some heretofore counted among the disciples bailed.

Pause to note, I’m big into church growth, but if it was high on the list of Jesus’ priorities, this seems an odd way to go about it. Couldn’t he have given them a little prosperity gospel: *Those who believe in me will be healthy, wealthy and wise. And help yourself to the bread. There’s more where that came from.*

Even as others were rushing to the exits, twelve were sticking with him, for the time being, Jesus asking, “Do you also wish to go away?” Bless his heart Simon Peter answers:

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Once again, we come to the Lord’s Table to celebrate the mystery of the Bread of Life. All are invited, of course. If I might add a pastoral word.

Over these forty plus years, nothing has personally pained me more than to see parishioners “go away,” as in leaving the fellowship. I realize it comes with the territory, but still...

Times of pastoral transition can be particularly tricky. Lots of folks left in my first year at St. Andrew’s, and there had been a rush to the exits even before I arrived. I particularly remember a family that stuck around just long enough for their daughter to receive a St. Andrew’s scholarship, but were never seen again.

After twelve plus years, there are folks ready for a pastoral change, but that’s tricky, too, as each one of these may have his or

her own set of hopes and expectations of the new guy. As no pastor can't possibly meet all these, those who are disappointed may look for reason to exit, indeed may invent reasons to exit.

From the passage read, Jesus appreciated those who stayed. This a great congregation. Your new lead pastor is going to bring a wealth of wisdom and experience. There will be new people coming into the congregation, the StACK Center being designed as a port of entry, and it's going to be so important that you make them welcome. What happens next at St. Andrew's will have less to do with Bruce Emmert than with you. May you be to St. Andrew's what Simon Peter was to Jesus: Lord, I'm sticking with you.

Let us stand for the Great Thanksgiving