Lord Christ

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 9:10-27

February 11, 2018
Like many of you, I watched the Super Bowl last Sunday night. I enjoyed the game. It kept me watching right up until the end. I endured the ads for things like TurboTax and Bud Lite but skipped the halftime show. I watched Justin Timberlake the first time around and well, you probably know how the whole thing went down.

NBC’s Dan Patrick interviewed Doug Pederson, coach of the Philadelphia Eagles after the game. Patrick asked Pederson, “How do you explain this—that nine years ago you were coaching in high school and here you are with this trophy?” Let me play for you his answer. (Coach Pederson answers Patrick’s question, “I can only give the praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving me this opportunity.”)

Nine years ago, Pederson was coaching at a Christian high school in Louisiana. Many thought he outcoached legendary coach Bill Belichick of the Patriots. Back in 2016, ESPN rated Doug Pederson as the worst coaching hire in the NFL.

I have one other post-game interview to share with you. The same reporter commented to MVP quarterback Nick Foles, “Just another game, right Nick?” Here is what Nick had to say. (Nick began, “Unbelievable. All the Glory to God….”)

After these two interviews, I could have sworn I was in church again. Incidentally, Nick is studying in the off-season to become a youth pastor after his playing days are over. For those who want to know more, the Eagles have released a seven-minute interview with three
other players on the team who talk about how Christianity is a binding force on their team. They speak of team Bible studies and baptisms at the team facility. In a day when everybody wants to keep faith out of the public arena, I find their candor refreshing.

Doug Pederson credits his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving him this opportunity in the Super bowl! Since Lord and Savior are two words we commonly use in relation to Christ, let’s explore their meaning. First, Jesus Christ is our Savior for sin. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is an ingenious solution to the problem posed by human sin. God in the person of Jesus pays the penalty for judgment on our sin and shows mercy to use as sinners.

Second, Jesus Christ is Lord. We are not sovereign. We acknowledge Christ as our Lord and master over our lives. Take Chapter 8, the focus of last Sunday’s sermon. Jesus exhibits mastery over a storm at sea (Luke 8:22-25). He demonstrates power over demonic forces (Luke 8:26-38). At the end of the chapter, he exerts Lordship over sickness (8:43-48 and even death itself (8:49-55).

Today’s lesson provides another account of Christ’s mastery over natural forces. Jesus feeding the 5000 is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels—which ought to tell us something about its relative importance to the gospel writers.

At the outset of chapter 9, Jesus sends his twelve disciples on a short-term mission project (9:1-9). He gives them divine power and authority to drive out demons, heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God (9:1-2). News about Jesus’ mighty work spreads like wildfire through the region. An crowd of people, estimated to be 5000 men, follows Jesus into the wilderness. (The number would have been
even greater if we added women and children to the mix, see Matthew 14:21.)

It is now late in the day. The disciples caucus among themselves about how to feed the massive crowd. They propose to Jesus, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside to find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here” (9:12). In verse 12, their suggestion to send them away contrasts with Jesus welcoming the crowd in the previous verse.

Jesus tells his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (9:13). “You” functions as an intensive pronoun, adding emphasis to Jesus’ imperative to feed them. You feed them. You give them something to eat. I would love to have seen the looks on their faces when Jesus told them it is their job to feed all these people.

Earlier, Jesus sent them on a mission without food or money (9:3-4). How on earth does he expect his disciples to feed the entire crowd without human resources?

The disciples canvass the crowd to determine what they have to work with. They identify five barley loaves and two fish. John supplies the added detail that five loaves and two fish represents a boy’s lunch. The disciples must have felt rather sheepish about offering Jesus a little boy’s fish sandwich.
Jesus now takes matters into his own hands. He directs his disciples to arrange the crowd into groups of fifty. Okay, everybody count off from one to fifty and circle up. Luke tells us, “Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven, gave thanks and broke them” (9:16). The language mirrors what Jesus says later at the Last Supper. “Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it” (22:19).

Here is where the story gets interesting. Jesus gives the bread and fish to his disciples who, in turn, distribute it to the crowd. The bread and fish supply never runs out. “Everybody ate and was satisfied,” Luke tells us (9:17).

How do you explain this miracle? I remember reading about this miracle in my college religion class. One writer speculated that Jesus had access to an underground cave with a storehouse of bread. Just tell it like it is, pal. It’s a miracle!

The disciples collect 12 baskets worth of leftovers. This last detail of collecting leftovers is for the expressed benefit of Jesus’ disciples. While the twelve want to send everyone packing to solve their food shortage, Jesus feeds them ‘til they want no more.

In 480 AD, Christians built a church on the site where Jesus may have performed this feeding of the 5000. The church was destroyed in 614 AD but has been excavated. This tile floor mosaic of bread and fish dates back to the original 5th century church.

So what difference does this story make in my life? Two takeaways come to mind. First, this story tells us something
significant about Jesus’ identity. Second, this story provides insight into disciples like us.

First, what we learn about Jesus. Two Sundays ago, we read the story of a dinner Jesus shared with Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. A woman shows up unannounced to the party to anoint Jesus’ feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Simon is incensed that Jesus does not throw her out for being a notorious sinner. Jesus tells a parable to silence her accusers and then pronounces forgiveness over her. Later, Simon and his cronies wonder among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (7:49).

In the eighth chapter, Jesus’ disciples witness his extraordinary power over a storm. They ask, “Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him” (8:25).

In chapter 9, the same chapter as this feeding of the 5000 story, Herod the Great catches wind of the stories circulating about Jesus and asks, “Who is this that I hear so many things about” (9:9).

Everybody asks the “Who is this?” question in Luke’s gospel. In the verses that follow today’s lesson, Jesus asks a similar question to his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” (9:18). Peter, who sometimes gets it wrong, this time nails it, “You are God’s Messiah” (9:20). It is Peter’s way of affirming Jesus’ Lordship. He is Lord over wind and sea. He is Lord over bread and fish. He is Lord over our lives, also.
Doug Pederson chose the biggest moment in his life to profess allegiance to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. How about you? Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Consider this sermon as your invitation to follow Christ as Lord and Savior of your life.

First, this story tells us something vital about the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Second, it tells us something about us as disciples. The feeding of the 5000 story follows immediately on the heels of Jesus sending his disciples on a mission to heal people and cast out demons. The juxtaposition of these two stories cannot be accidental. Luke tells these two stories side by side on purpose.

His disciples have just witnessed Jesus’ power to cast out demons and heal people. Yet here they are, stymied about how to feed people without human resources. How quickly they adopt a natural solution to remedy their food crisis. After witnessing Jesus’ power at work through them, the best they can come up with is to send everyone on their merry way. They do not ask Jesus for help or seek his intervention.

We often operate with an attitude of scarcity in the church. We do not have enough money or enough volunteers to accomplish Christ’s mission. The enormity of human need overwhelms us. How can we feed all these people when we have the equivalent of five loaves and two fish?

People tell me God never gives us more than we can handle. Where in the Bible does it say that? In our story, Jesus gives his disciples far more than they can handle. Let me rephrase this God never gives me more than I can handle sentiment. God never gives us more than He can handle.
John Buchanan, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, tells a story about the time when he served a church in Scotland for a summer. John became good friends with Johnny Dunlop, a neighboring pastor. Johnny served in the British infantry during WWII. His unit was surrounded and captured. Johnny and his unit ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Poland. They were fed a bowl of thin soup and table scraps of bread each day. Some prisoners became despondent in such harsh conditions. They threw themselves against a barbed wire fence, which the guards interpreted as an escape. The border guards shot and killed any such fugitives.

One night, Johnny skipped out of the barracks and made his way toward the fence under the cover of darkness. There, he contemplated ending it all. Suddenly, he sensed movement on the other side of the fence. A Polish farmer appeared out of the darkness near the fence, holding a half potato in his hand. This farmer threw the potato over the fence. As Johnny picked it up, the farmer said in heavily accented English, “The body of Christ.”

A half potato is not much, yet this half potato may have saved Johnny’s life. The farmer gave a half potato. The little boy gave fives loaves and two fish.

Bottom line: we give God what we have. Jesus will take care of the rest.