

Fulfillment

First Congregational United Church of Christ
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Dale L. Bishop

Text: John 6:1-21

This is a summer sermon. Yes, it will be based on today's suggested lectionary text from John's gospel, but it's inspired as much by what happens here in this achingly beautiful part of the world during this brief but glorious season as it is inspired by text for the day. There's nothing all that extraordinary in what I'm going to describe, except that we sometimes forget that what seems ordinary, what we take for granted in our lives here, in the larger scheme of things really *is* extraordinary.

Some years ago, Pat and I noticed in the rafters underneath our deck the beginnings of a robin's nest. Much of it was straw that we had piled up the previous fall in case we needed it to cover the septic system during the winter if there wasn't enough snow. But there were other elements of construction in the nest as well. One day we saw a robin toting a tuft of fur that we had brushed from our endlessly shedding Chocolate Lab, Luke. Luke is no longer with us, but I'm guessing that his fur is still being endlessly recycled. Well, soon there was a nest, and then there were robins spending a lot of time on the nest, and then there was a glimpse of the telltale light blue eggs peeking out from the nest.

We watched as the adult robins would leave the nest and hop around our meadow, making their circuit around the perimeter, somehow sensing where the worms were. The nest was right over the entryway to our house, so we would have to pass

under it several times a day, often with our dogs. At the beginning of this process, the mother robin would fly off whenever our door would open, or when we would pull up in our driveway, but eventually she seemed to get used to our routine, or perhaps she just became more intent on her task of egg-hatching and nestling feeding. Every night when I took the dogs out for their last constitutional, and every morning when I took them out for their first, the robin would be there, sheltering her young from the April cold.

After a couple of weeks, we caught glimpses of the little beaks of what we determined were four baby robins. The feeding activity intensified, with both mom and dad involved. The babies grew so quickly that it almost seemed that they were being inflated. Soon we could see their heads and breasts, and their impassive stone-faced stare, not moving a millimeter as we passed around or beneath them. We speculated that mom had instructed them to be very, very still, and that they were being very, very obedient. We, in turn, tried to be as inconspicuous as anybody can be with two rambunctious dogs, one of which weighed a hundred pounds.

Then, one morning, it appeared that one of the four nestlings had almost popped out of the nest. It was sitting or standing on top of the others. Pat saw it take its first flight, and it was a flawless effort, as the fledgling robin made it safely to our big maple tree. By that evening, all four robins had fledged. Number four had a bit more trouble than the others, landing first on our driveway, but the mother or father bird was in the tree calling to it, and after a few hops, it, too, took off. And then they were all gone: mother, father, babies, and suddenly we were experiencing the empty nest syndrome. We had no idea that a few weeks later, the whole process would start all over again, in the same nest, and that we would be subjected to all the anxiety and worry we had experienced the first time around.

Like I say, there's nothing so extraordinary about all this. Many or all of you, have witnessed similar dramas in your own backyards. But, of course, it *is* extraordinary. The will, or the impulse, toward life should fill us with awe and wonder. Robins don't get bored. It is their full-time vocation to create and nurture new life. Life itself is sufficient to them.

One of the things that pastors who are suffering from burnout will sometimes say to one another is, "I need to be fed." And of course pastors aren't the only people who suffer from burnout, and they're certainly not the only people who need to be fed. Of course, when we say that we need to be fed, we aren't speaking literally. In fact, we all know the statistics that tell us that most of us Americans are overfed. Most of us either eat too much or we eat stuff that isn't good for us. Perhaps it's related to a hunger in our spirits. There is a void in our lives that we try to fill up with our excesses: too much food, too much drink, too many things that we buy, too much sedentary television, too much time seated in front of our various screens.

Jesus knew about hunger, both the physical and the spiritual kind. The account of Jesus' feeding the multitudes with a little boy's five loaves and two fish finds its way into all four gospels, including John's rendering that we just heard. That should tell us that this was an important moment in Jesus' ministry. In rare unanimity the gospel writers felt that the feeding of the multitude tells us something essential about who Jesus was and who Jesus is. And we should remember that significant things happened when Jesus feasted with others. We remember the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, an event that John called Jesus' first miracle; we remember the woman who interrupted the men gathered around a meal so that she could bathe Jesus' feet in her tears and with an expensive ointment. And then there was Jesus' meal with Zacchaeus, the tax-collector who climbed a tree in order to see Jesus in the crowd,

as Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem. And, of course, one of our two sacraments is itself a meal, commemorating Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples before he was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus, it's clear, was no ascetic monk. He wasn't someone who tried to starve himself into spiritual enlightenment. In fact, one of the criticisms leveled against him by the religious establishment was that unlike the abstemious John the Baptist, Jesus ate and drank with sinners. Even the prayer he taught us to pray includes the plea, "Give us this day our daily bread." But with Jesus it's never just about the food. Meals weren't an end in themselves, they were an occasion for fellowship, which is why we call our sacrament "communion." For Jesus, there was always something beyond the physical act of eating and drinking, something that added meaning to the eating and drinking.

According to John, when Jesus was able to feed the multitude with those few scraps of food, the people began to speculate that he was a prophet or even a king. John says that Jesus feared that they would come and take him by force to make him a king, so he withdrew and went back up the mountain to be by himself. Imagine! Imagine that in our time of power-hungry politicians. Jesus was *afraid* that they would make him a king.

Jesus knew the difference, and wanted us to know the difference, between the bread that fills our stomachs and the bread that feeds our souls. He told the crowds who were following him that he himself was the bread of life, that he was the bread of God that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (John 6:33). And the crowds responded, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Now, I'm guessing that those of you who remember how this sermon started may be asking yourself, "What does all this have to do with the baby robins?" Well, this is how my appreciative summer mind has been working. I lived for thirty

years in New York City. I loved New York City, and don't regret a minute I spent there. But in New York City the closest you can come to the untamed natural world is a visit to the Bronx Zoo, or sitting on a park bench feeding the squirrels. And those squirrels are so domesticated by city life that they look both ways before they cross the street. As much as I loved New York, I realized that living in New York produced in me a hunger that couldn't be sated by all of the wonderful things that the city has to offer in the way of food, cultural events or yes, in the making and spending of money that is so central to New York's ethos. I needed to live in a place where I could watch a nest being built, robins tending to the nest, and then the astonishing feats of birth and of first flight. I needed to live someplace where gazing at a full moon didn't require just the right angle of vision through the canyon of buildings that surrounded me. I swear that one night while I was walking home I wondered about that new street lamp that brightened a usually dark place on Broadway until I realized it was the moon. I needed a place where I could be fed by all of these little miracles, fed in ways that the best restaurants and the most sophisticated cultural environment never could feed me.

I love words. I like to study their origins, to puzzle out the way they are put together and how they came to mean what they've come to mean. The word that came to mind as I was reflecting on this text and this sermon is "fulfillment." The word is redolent with redundancy, having both fill and full as its component parts. But fulfillment, the kind of fulfillment that Jesus spoke of is a sense of completeness and wholeness. It's the satisfaction that comes not from stuffing ourselves with the things that we think we need, but don't, but from reaching a sense of serenity and peace within. That's why it's fulfillment, and not "fill-fullment." Nature, in its divine wisdom, points us toward fulfillment. Nature, in fact, represents the very essence of fulfillment.

Jesus said to the people who pursued him across the sea and to the mountaintop, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” If you need to be fed, really fed, one of the ways you can do that is to follow Jesus’ suggestion that we consider the lilies of the field, or look to the robin’s nest, or look at the greens of the forest and the blues of the skies and the lakes, or feel the cool evening breeze after a hot summer day. In short, live here. Really live here. I think that if you do that, you will discover something that will point you toward God’s grace. You will find a source of nourishment that will never fail; you will drink water that never needs to be replenished. You will find life, life that is abundant and life that is eternal. You will be fed. Amen.