

Prayer of the Day: We praise you, dear God, for signs of your mighty power around us all the time. You call us here to see those signs more deeply, to receive the strength and guidance they bring. Astound us again, with your fullness in Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and minds as we will our hands and mouths, to be filled by your Spirit of compassion and steadfast love. Then send us ever in your care, to help all people and creation everywhere see that you there, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Signs of More

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; John 6:24-35

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There was hardly a moment when I couldn't see a sign. Driving along I-94 billboard after billboard tried to convince me to have more. Auto dealers where I'd get more bang for my buck. Home improvement warehouses with more paint and lumber. More courage for my life and more unity with others. More medical treatment. More toys for my kids. More security for my money. That's when Suzanne said, "Hey listen to this article. It's about being happy. Contrary to popular belief the size of your home, professional status and income don't have a substantial impact on your emotional well-being. Thinking if only I had a bigger house, the new car, the corner office, I'd be so much better off is a trap. It feels great at first, but the mental highs don't really last. More money doesn't bring genuine joy either. Of course, cash in the bank means less day-to-day anxiety about bills. Beyond basic needs research consistently shows greater income doesn't really boost happiness. Even lottery winners are no happier a year after their numbers hit. Bottom line," the author concludes, "The way we view the world is key." (*Family Circle*, 8/09, 83)

When we're looking for more in life, we know it goes beyond simply satisfying our desires, doesn't it? We know it's more than material things alone. Even as at times like these more of the basics is just what some people need.

And there's a different kind of "more" we humans long for – more meaning, more connection, more to life than what meets the eye, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes. (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, xiv) It's about looking deeper than the details. Trouble is that when we look deeper, our vision can get clouded by desires for personal satisfaction.

Nathan helps David wipe the mirror clean and see a little deeper into his desires for more of Bathsheba. And when the crowd comes looking for more loaves to fill their tummies they seem a bit like what came to be called rice Christians in 19th century China. People joined the church and remained active as long as their own material needs were met by the congregation. When their life improved and they no longer needed rice, they drifted away. It seems a bit like crowds who came to churches in Eastern Europe just before the fall of communism when pastors and congregations spoke out against tyranny. And when liberty grew in real, material ways the crowds left churches looking far more empty again. (O. Benjamin Sparks, *Feasting on the Word*, year B, vol. 3, 308)

And when we look into our own mirrors, maybe it can seem like how we feel, busy with our involvements here at church – teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, serving on Deacons or Session, painting, planning, preparing. Friends, of course, there's goodness in all of these efforts. But can we see beneath the surface of success in those activities to appreciate God's grace shared in and through them? Do we feel the Spirit's love beyond the imperfections? Do we sense the presence of Christ among us?

Trouble is, if we don't then they can fail to really nourish us. If we don't, then both whatever our achievements and disappointments will drain us. And we'll become bitter or burn out and check out. When God's goodness gets defined by our personal desires being satisfied here at church then we risk the same insatiable hungers we have with material things. Our goodness will be momentary before we feel empty again, deficient, ever wanting more.

More than being full of loaves, Jesus invites us all to share a fulfilling life. He tries to focus our attention beyond details like morsels of bread to the meaning of all we say and do. He offers salvation – a relationship that transforms the way we see the world, what we desire and work for; how we feel about it all in the end. In Jesus' way of compassion for all people more than competition; in his parables and prophetic visions that overturn pure ideology; in his life of humble, loving service to others more than self ... we get nourished with far more than just bread and wine that perish. We share the eternal goodness of God's heaven.

Like the crowds in John's gospel. Like crowds of people whose relationship with God remains a vague spiritual longing for "the More" void of any real religion, we earnestly want to know how to participate in this work of God throughout the world. Jesus tells us: First, see the signs. Now, we look for signs of goodness all the time in stock market reports and various economic indicators; in sports scores and weather forecasts, magazine articles and numbers of church members. And friends, though they may fill us momentarily, in the end, it feels to me anyway as though they're little better than morsels of bread. As John tells the story, the irony is that the crowds use all the right words but they miss the deeper, truer meaning. They long for a sign, but they've already received one and didn't recognize it.

Jesus gives us a sign of God's presence all the time in his relationships with other people. And the promise of our faith is that the same power of God's love that raised Jesus from the tomb remains alive and active, vibrant and brilliant among us in our relationships of love. Dear friends, look at other people with Jesus' compassion. Watch the news with an eye for Jesus' parables and prophetic visions. Find our humble paths forward guided by Jesus' light of sacrificial love. And we will glimpse here, there, everywhere more life the way God intends

There's hardly a moment when I can't see a sign of God's More among us.

I called to check on an older woman who had knee replaced recently. "Well, I was just kicked out of therapy today. I'm all done. That's a good sign. I guess I'll live!" she said. And then she went on to tell me about all the plans now possible to be made among family and friends.

We see signs of more in a baby shower, where through whatever things unwrapped, in the gifts given and received we share the joy, the uncertainties, the deep gratitude of much anticipated new life.

We see signs of more in budget planning already begun for 2010. Beyond the figures of shared expenses upon which we'll agree, we build up clarity, collaboration, the Spirit of common service in God's love as we create sanctuary for all.

We see signs in lunch at Stuart's Landing that lasts more than two hours. As fish flap, frogs hop and ducks swim around us, we discuss *the Shack*, health care, life decisions and Middle East peace. And deeper than details upon which we agree much and differ a bit, we believe that what makes the difference in goodness for society is when we assess and act on these issues through the lens of faith.

When we look through the lens of God's love we see *signs of more*
awake in every human breast,
in truths sought through science,
in beauty oft revealed in human art, like our beautiful music this morning.

And here today, we share the sign of God's presence in the sacrament of communion. The simple staples of bread and cup become for us visible symbols of how God's love fills us in so many ways invisible. As we eat together, we open our hearts to God's grace that gives us power for life beyond all we think possible. We open our minds to God's mercy that will guide our way through conflicts and times of uncertainty. It's just like Jesus urged the crowd to look a little deeper, beyond the Exodus manna itself to see the Lord and Giver of all Life.

And here today, as we share this sign of our communion with God by intinction, we feel how God's love and grace and mercy so often works among us. The way we've typically shared communion is comfortable, familiar, no uncertainty about what's going to happen when. In that sign we can feel, with much gratitude, the goodness of stability and security in God's love, even when it's not always gone perfectly. And yet, God's loving presence in our lives is not always just comforting and routine. In our relationship with God sometimes Jesus' words and actions challenge us. Sometimes God's Spirit moves us out of our familiar places and patterns to see the world in a new way, to change our perspectives, our priorities and routines. To resist it not only risks cutting off growth in life. It risks trying to control God, to treat God as some divine vending machine – give me what I want when I want it. Not unlike crowds disconcerted when Jesus proved beyond their control. Not going where they expected. Not acting as they expect. Not giving them exactly what they expect.

Look, it's not at all that the way of communion with which we're familiar is bad and intinction all good. There is much goodness beyond hollow rituals in all ways we might celebrate. We feel different things accented more in each method. When we come forward from wherever we are, we hear Jesus encourage us loud and clear: "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." When we get up from our comfortable positions it may feel as though we stand out a bit more – not unlike times we feel vulnerable in life. When we move forward past others who are not so able, we see how

God's grace makes ways to serve others who may feel different in that moment for whatever reason, but desperately don't want to be left behind. When we tear a piece off we can guarantee it won't be in perfectly shaped pieces the same for every person! God's love fills us all in different ways, each according to need. And often when we receive God's forgiveness each in our way, our hands may bear the mark (of juice) a bit, too. As we turn to go back, we know that sharing signs of God's more, often turns us around in life and leads to go home by another way.

And this time, as we celebrate our relationship with God, may we remember our relationship with others. For that's really what's behind this new experience, requested by some members among us. We know, that so many of us come here with different meaningful experiences of faith. If we are truly going to welcome one another and create sanctuary for all in God's grace, it means we get to know what's meaningful for others and even try to share it some, as well. As we follow Jesus, we are reminded that a fulfilling life comes when we serve together with compassion and humility, open to perspectives beyond our personal satisfaction. When we do, inevitably we grow and see more of God than we could ever have expected and ever could have alone.

And one more thing ... There will likely be crumbs on the floor. And Diane remembered at a Presbytery meeting when her whole piece of bread fell into cup. Maybe there will be such reminders of things in normal life that don't go as we want or expect. Just be at peace ... it will all be perfect in God's grace!

Just for a moment as we come forward, leave behind in the pews all of our concerns about more work, more house of our own to call a home, more financial stability in this economy, more plans and preparations here at church. Come with our questions and fears, with our longings and hopes. Come with all that makes our hearts hunger for more, the More of God's love in and through and beyond the loaves that makes our lives meaningful and fulfilled. In and through and beyond all the details come to live deeply, for Jesus has given a sign of More!

Thanks be to God.