My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

For the rest of the summer we pivot into the Gospel of John, into a series of signs of Jesus’ divinity. We have seen his healings, heard his teachings, listened to his prophecies, and seen that he has had to leave his home because his mother and brothers and neighbors cannot accept that these things are happening from Jesus.

Remember, people have said that nothing good comes from Nazareth, after all.

Jesus chooses to hang out with the little ones, those who are NOT welcomed into the synagogue and polite society. He dines with prostitutes and lepers because they are the ones with no expectations, only the willingness to listen with empathy and grace. It is the false assumptions of others that make them blind to who he really is, to what is going on, to the theophany that God has put before them. So here we go, listen up.

The disciples and Jesus again have a large crowd. Jesus asks Philip, who is from Bethsaida, about 9 miles away, where the nearest grocer is to get bread for all these people.

The disciples have seen many great things from Jesus and yet they still interpret the question at the most conventional level: there’s not enough money to buy food for so many and not enough bread to go around even if we had enough money. And yet, the question comes from the one to whom they seek guidance and grace. We cannot see any more than what we already know. Despite all that God has created, all that God has provided, all that God is in our relationship, we still rely on only what we know. We limit God all the time in this way, assuming what’s possible (or not). Is God asking an impossible question? What is our primary emotion when we are asked to do something that is a difficult situation and no easy answer? It’s frustration, isn’t it?

Does God intend for frustration to be the result here? No. But the disciples forget what we mention almost every week: God’s bigger than that.

Philip doesn’t invite his God relationship into the conversation, that the first or second look at feeding this many people won’t provide a solution. But the disciples of wisdom always make room for God’s providence with eyes that can see, and ears that can hear.

Jesus asked this from Philip as a test, just as God tested Abraham. God allows tests to occur, not expecting failure, but expecting the person to be in the situation where they say, “OK, God, I don’t get it, but this is in your hands now.” It’s at that point, where the eyes and ears are open, that stuff happens. For Abraham it was a ram that appeared, and God’s voice stilling him, right? Here Jesus wants to prepare Philip in the same way, to witness what is about to happen as a theophany.

A young boy comes forward. “Let the children come to me”, said Matthew’s Gospel, and here again is one of the little ones who is not daunted by the question of feeding so many people. The young boy’s lunch had only barley loaves. Do you know what barley represents in the Bible? First, it is the poor person’s bread, who cannot afford wheat. Second, it symbolizes sustenance during times of hardship, God’s provision for physical needs, much like the manna gathered during the exodus. Last, barley is a symbol of firsts, since it is the first harvest of the year. This is the first time that the people saw Jesus as the promised Messiah.

But “Messiah” is the savior of the people; it is ***not*** a declaration of divinity. The people are STILL, even after seeing God’s providence, trying to fit God into their conception, their realization, their experience. It’s fine and dandy to use the Wesleyan Methodist tool of experience and reason to help pursue your faith and mission. But in doing so, let’s remember we’re made in God’s image, not the other way around.

We can spend a lifetime coming to church and faith and pray and surround ourselves with reminders about how we live and expect God to fit into those perceptions and patterns. And in doing so, we take the miracle out of miracles. We put so much attention on our truth being THE truth, surrounding ourselves with clones of ourselves who look like us, think like us, that we leave no room for God and a little kid who says, “Is this what you need?”

The child gives himself to God, and gives all that they have. Others in the crowd had more than the boy had, but in their abundance, they thought they didn’t have enough to satisfy the crowd so the gave nothing at all, hoarding what they could give. How about that, huh? When we are asked to give, do we criticize others who give freely when we will not? Or do we withhold until we see others giving, and even then, we wait for more before our hearts are turned? If we offer nothing to God, God will have nothing to use in us.

Jesus first gave thanks to God. And then he took the loaves and distributed them. HE did this, not disciples, and so the people got as much as they wanted.

We’re talking the bread of life here, aren’t we? The poor man’s loaf is all we are offered, and how often we pass because of its taste, its texture, or what others might say if they saw us eating of it, too. Our needs and problems are not obstacles for God. They are constructs of our own small hearts and minds and spirits to not see the breadth and depth and width of the Kingdom around us right here, right now, at this moment in time. And still, we do not see, we do not know, we cannot share.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” The children don’t know impossibility when it comes to trying things. When it comes to sharing things when someone is suffering. They’re empathetic, and somewhere along the way, we unlearn lessons of community, and take on the mantles of self-interest. What are my wants, my needs, my return on investment, what’s my reward?

I’ve got news for you. There is no reward for doing God’s work. Listen to the words of William Sloane Coffin, one of the great preachers of the UCC in the 20th century, longtime pastor at Yale University and Riverside Church.

“We must guard against being too individualistic and elitist in our understanding of spirituality. Some Christians talk endlessly about the importance of one’s interior life and how to develop it more fully, forgetting the Christ is born to bring hope and joy also to whole communities of people—the exiles, the deported, the tortured prisoners [yes, we’re also talking the ones the CIA tortured and are still imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay and never charged with a crime] and the silenced.”

God remembers and points us in the direction of the forgotten so that we might enter into their reality, their worldview, and extend the promise of unity with God. THAT is the promise and miracle of the loaves and fishes. When we can say we will welcome, accept, and defend the ones we cannot imagine being around, maybe we’ll get it, and we’ll say one day, “Is this what you need?”

Thanks be to God, Amen.