In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning’s Gospel Lesson is from St. John Chapter 6 – the first twenty-one verses. We are at the start of a sequence of five Sundays all devoted to St. John Chapter 6. It is an important chapter often called “The Bread of Life Discourses.” Our Lord Jesus is the Bread of Life. He is the source of inexhaustible life for us.

Last week I brought the Holy Communion to one of our homebound members who was able to pitch right in with me in reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm by memory. That Psalm was the appointed Psalm for last week, and it is a beloved Psalm for many of us. It was so for this dear homebound member.

When we reached the last verse, I found myself moved to repeat the final word and to emphasize it. It went something like this:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

(Psalm 23:6, KJV)

I repeated that time span there! For ever! And our dear member laughed at that. It was a joyful laugh. Here we human beings are, running low on strength, many of us, running out of time, some of us. But in face of all such decline and weakness and limits, our elderly sister in the Lord could laugh. It was one of the best things I have heard in a long time. She was about to receive the Holy Communion. She was about to receive the very Bread of Life. She was about to be reassured by our risen Jesus that he gave his body and his blood for her for the forgiveness of her sins. He was about to promise her that she will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. For ever! Compared to this gospel promise of the Bread of Life, all the sorrows and setbacks of this fallen world don’t add up to as much as they claim. They do not have the final word. The final word is inexhaustible life from our Lord Jesus. Till then, let each of us live with the integrity of true and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, the very Bread of Life.

So we have five Sundays stretching ahead of us all devoted to the Bread of Life discourses in John Chapter 6. This sequence of five Sundays gives us a chance to go leisurely through this great chapter.

I would like to begin by speaking of the disciple Philip. I like Philip. He is the one who answered the skeptical question of Nathanael about Nazareth. When Philip told Nathanael about Jesus, and about how godly Jesus seemed, Nathanael had asked this question:
Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46, KJV)

To this skeptical question, my man Philip had given the perfect and simplest answer:

Philip saith unto him, Come and see. (John 1:46, KJV)

It is the model answer for all of us uncertain evangelists. When we are hard-pressed, and we worry whether we can come up with the perfect answer to a skeptical world, at least we can remember Philip, and in remembering him, we might save a soul: “Come and see.” Come to Immanuel Lutheran Church or to whatever church is near you and join in the liturgy. Come and see Jesus! Come and learn of him. Come and hear what he has to say to you for this coming week.

And so I like Philip for the simple but wonderful answer he gave to Nathanael: Come and see. Also I like Philip because that was my brother’s name. We come, then, to my opening text from John Chapter 6. It speaks of Philip:

5Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, “How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5, RSV)

Who could blame Philip if he sighed and thought to himself, “My goodness! There are twelve of us here. Why is Jesus focusing on me? Why doesn’t he ask this question of Peter? Peter is our leader. Or why doesn’t he ask James or John—those sons of thunder? Or why doesn’t he ask Judas, who, after all, is the keeper of the purse? Judas is the one who knows best about our resources. Judas is the one who has the best chance of answering the question, ‘How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?’ Why do the eyes of Jesus rather slide on over the other disciples and land on me? Me, of all people?”

Well, to that question I believe the answer goes this way: We do not have to pray like St. Peter, we do not have to preach like St. Paul, to be useful to Jesus. Certainly Jesus has his loving eye on St. Peter and on St. Paul, but also on Philip and on all the people of the church. This includes you and me in our modern generation. The eyes of Jesus look with love upon Pope Francis, I am

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1 Mark 3:17
2 John 12:6
sure, and upon all kinds of fancy and renowned Christians, but also he looks with love upon you and me. However unremarkable or unaccomplished or even however sinful and disappointing our past has been, Jesus regards us with love and with hope, and he could use our penitential life and our help. Philip is our symbol of this. We are Philip and from time to time Jesus turns to us and seeks our help.

So Philip steps up to the plate and gives it his best swing. He has been asked a practical question. How are we to feed 5,000 people? He does his calculations and he gives his answer: We cannot. It is impossible!

Now, I do not mean to criticize Philip overmuch, and yet it seems to me that in doing his calculations Philip has forgotten some important things about Jesus. For one thing, Jesus has just recently healed the invalid at the pool of Bethesda. That was in Chapter 5 – the chapter just before our present chapter. The man had lain helpless for thirty-eight years hoping for a miracle of healing. Jesus had done that for the man. “Perhaps,” Philip could have thought to himself, “as Jesus healed the invalid so he can do wonders for this crowd. Perhaps Jesus can feed them all!”

And then, going back a few chapters earlier still, we find a miracle akin to what is needed now. I am referring to the miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2). That miracle had also involved a glorification of humble resources in order to bring gladness to all the people of the wedding. In that case it was water. Jesus had commanded that six stone jars should be filled with water and the water distributed to the wedding guests. The water had become wine! It was the best wine around. If you like wine, I bet you would have loved that wine! Perhaps now Philip could have thought to himself, “We do not have many resources, but maybe Jesus can take whatever is at hand and permit it to be enough for everyone – even for these 5,000 people!”

But Philip, bless him, takes no such great leap of faith at this time. Instead he does his calculations and gives his answer: “It is impossible for us to feed all these people.”

From this little scene perhaps we can learn a lesson: We do not need to be a genius or a saint to lend a hand to the work of Jesus. Jesus could have fed those 5000 people without any input from Philip. But that is not what Jesus wanted. He wanted Philip to lend a hand to the great miracle ahead. And so Philip plays a part in the story in a way that is natural for him. He adds things up in his mind and concludes that nothing can be done to feed all these people. It might not have been a profound or inspired answer, but it is an answer that helps advance the story. Jesus asks Philip a question, and Philip does not ignore his Lord. He contributes to the miracle by giving his honest answer to Jesus. Jesus might well have been pleased with Philip and his answer because when Philip spoke as best he could, he thereby, as it were, offered material to Jesus to work with. In this case, Philip’s practical answer
helped highlight that something extraordinary was about to take place. What was impossible with man is about to become possible with Jesus.3

Now I want to shift over to our appointed Epistle reading for this Sunday. It is from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, from Chapter 3. There is a lovely pastoral prayer in this reading. It is a prayer that we should think bigger thoughts, that Philip should think bigger thoughts concerning Jesus, and that each of us should increasingly understand that in the gospel concerning Jesus of Nazareth, we have an entirely new and encouraging slant on things. St. Paul’s prayer goes this way:

18I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:18-19, NRSV)

An elderly person recently asked me, in all honesty, whether I really believed in the power of prayer. She referred to a movie. As I understand it, it was a movie starring Jim Carrey. She told me of a scene in which God was having trouble figuring out how to answer all the prayers of those who wanted to win the lottery.

To me, such a question is a drop in the bucket. It is the simplest of things for our Maker. To him who created everything, including the laws of nature by which the planets are spinning throughout the universe and the electrons are spinning in the molecules of our own bodies... to such a God how to answer the prayers of the many people who are praying to win the lottery is a small matter. Someday I swear we will see the answer to that question about the lottery and we will see that the Lord gave the perfect answer. If we would “comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” if we would permit ourselves to comprehend more of the majesty and the power of Christ’s love, then we could face this life of ours with more confidence and with more courage.

Then, after St. Paul’s pastoral prayer that we should comprehend more of the depth and breath of Christ’s love, Paul turns to glory. He gives glory to the God who can do far more than even Philip could imagine. St. Paul’s words go this way:

20Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or

Imagine, \textsuperscript{21}to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:20-21, NRSV)

In the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, Jesus did more than you and I are accustomed to thinking possible. So let us think bigger thoughts concerning Jesus. Let us imagine that we can do some extraordinary and good things in this world because we have this Jesus on our side – the One who “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” To this one, the very Bread of Life, the source of inexhaustible life for us, be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen