

**Nathaniel “Than” Hitt**  
**July 28, 2024**

Good morning. My name is Than Hitt, and today I will be reading from John 6 verses 1-15.

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.*

*When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’*

*One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.*

*When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’*

*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

Amen.

This of course is the loaves and fishes story - perhaps one of the most famous passages in the Bible. We’ve all heard it, and we can hear in it several familiar refrains, beginning with “follow Jesus and you shall be fed.” But that’s not where the story ends - and I’d like to share some reflections with you today that begin here and traverse parenthood, science, politics, and democracy. [And I promise I’ll do so in under 10 minutes with no powerpoint slides!]

But first, let’s start with the fish. You may know I have spent years studying fish biology in Appalachian rivers and streams. I’ve investigated the effects of climate change, the importance of groundwater, and the deep evolutionary history of fish diversity in Appalachia - which by the way is one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth.

And so you will not be surprised when I confirm that - no - fish don't magically multiply on land. Although they can multiply in a seemingly miraculous fashion naturally - after all, some species have thousands of eggs per female, so it would be possible for 2 fish to feed 5000 in that way. But on land, in a creel basket - no - that's not how it works.

But that of course is not the point, and as we've heard many times before in this sanctuary "I take the Bible too seriously to take it literally."

Instead, this story is about community and what we can do when we do it together. It's about what happens when we share what we have, even when we may be convinced we have nothing to share. It's about an abundance mindset, a mindset that sees neighbors not as competitors for dwindling resources but as collaborators for our mutual survival and prosperity.

And so what does this have to do with parenthood?

Well if you would have asked me 10 years ago, I would have had a different answer. But now Hazel is 14 and entering her first year at Jefferson High School [go cougars!], and Mary Anne and I are so proud of her.

It's an epic time in life, and so many things at once tumultuous, exciting, overwhelming, energizing, depressing, exasperating, scary, and empowering.

And independence is a huge part of this: learning how to drive, how to manage your schedule and studies, how to manage money, how to manage relationships.

Oh the pressure to succeed! Especially for young women, the unrelenting voice of social media saying "you're not pretty enough", "you're not cool enough", "you have the wrong clothes," and so on.

I think the loaves and fishes story has something to offer here. It reminds us that - despite the pressures to be independent - you're not in this by yourself. And as a parent my job now becomes somewhat bittersweet - it's about saying goodbye to the girl who relied on us for everything, and saying hello to a young woman who lives in community - a community that provides sustenance even when it feels like there is not enough to go around. A community centered in her family but reaching out to the world.

Which brings me to science.

Recall that in this passage Jesus did not feed the crowd. He did not fly around taking orders like some sort of magical waiter on wings. No, he invited the crowd to share what they already have - what they had already brought with them - and in so doing a miraculous result: abundance.

In some ways this is how I think about science. After all, the motto of the first scientific society was “Nullius in verba” which essentially means “see for yourself”.

When the king said “the earth is flat!” Galileo said “no, see for yourself.” And in doing so the community expanded. People shared their observations, shared their questioning and insights - and just like bread and fish multiplying in abundance, our knowledge of the world multiplied in abundance.

And let’s face it - we’ve lost touch with the simple fact that science is of the people, not of elites, yet that is how it is often portrayed. After all, it takes education and diligence and yes even some sweat to do science. And worse of all we know the perils of “doing my own research” on vaccine safety, global pandemics, and a host of issues where it is really hard if not impossible to do original research. After all, who has a Hadron collider or electron microscope sitting around in their garage?

But for environmental safety and conservation we have an opportunity. An opportunity to connect people and empower communities to monitor air quality and water quality with tools we already have - for example that cell phone in your pocket. Tools we already brought with us, insights that we can share like loaves and fishes were shared.

And by sharing our insights with each other, we can work for environmental justice in Appalachia.

And so that’s why I quit my job. Let me explain.

Last Friday, I resigned as a researcher with the U.S. Geological Survey - where I have worked for 15 years - to begin as Senior Scientist with the West Virginia Rivers Coalition.

I have the utmost respect for my colleagues at USGS - and for Dave Smith in particular who had the gumption to hire me in the first place. But I believe that just like the loaves and fishes flowed from the crowd and sustained the crowd, so must science-based advocacy emerge from the public to sustain the public good.

I didn’t know how to say it, but Brandon Dennison did when I mentioned my upcoming career change during his visit a few weeks ago. He said “you’ve been called to do this,” and he would know what that looks like. I hope he’s right, and I believe he is.

I’ll still be living in Shepherdstown, but I’ll be spending time in Charleston and on Capitol Hill. I’ll be working on legislation and litigation to apply science for conservation and public health, and to hold polluters to account. And if I am true to the loaves and fishes story, I will do so by empowering local communities, watershed organizations, anglers, boaters - everyone who drinks water - to “see for themselves” with open-science strategies that center environmental justice.

Which brings me to politics and democracy. Let's face it: many of us have lost faith in institutions and their ability to defend the public good. And the only way out is to look into your satchell - find what you have to share - and share it. November 5 is almost here, and we each have something to share as we consider the world we want to see as we wake up the morning of November 6.

We cannot wait for a glorious leader to make everything right. Jesus shows us that people have the power to feed the hungry, to build a sustainable economy, to protect clean air and water and wildlands.

And then Jesus shows us perhaps the best part. Instead of basking in the victory once the crowd had been fed, he went into the wilderness: "*he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*"

In this reading Jesus shows us true leadership - empowering others and getting out of the way. That is the lesson I hope to embody as a parent, as a scientist, as a citizen. Even in tumultuous times, may we all take comfort in an abundance mindset with faith that we already have what we need - we just need to share it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.