“NOBODY EXPECTED A MEAL”
Psalm 78, John 6:1-14, 32-35

1) Last week I began my series on the miracles of Jesus as told in the Gospel of John. The story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is the only miracle story found in each of the gospels, however, the account told by Matthew, Mark and Luke gets some modifications when John tells it. You might remember that when John writes, he is less concerned with details told exactly as they took place, and more concerned with how each event, and especially each miracle, has an underlying message about Jesus. So, in the synoptics the miracle of the Bread and Loaves, as it is sometimes called, is more about taking care of the physical and spiritual needs of those who have come to learn from Jesus. We’re told that Jesus had compassion for the crowds and refused to have them sent away without first giving them something to eat.

2) John is different. He sets the story on a mountain on the other side of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had gone to spend time with his disciples. The mountain setting might remind his readers of Moses or Elijah going up a mountain to commune with God or of the Transfiguration of Jesus which is told by the Synoptic gospels but not by John. Furthermore, John tells us that it is the time of Passover, the feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover recounts the miraculous escape of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery and God’s care in the ensuing years by sending manna from heaven to feed them in the wilderness. In John, it’s not the disciples who come to Jesus telling him to send folks home to eat, but rather Jesus prodding Philip with the thought-provoking question, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” In first century Palestine one didn’t normally provide food with a lecture, not even coffee and cookies afterwards! Though people had been out in the countryside with Jesus for perhaps several days, they were used to going without food—it was a way of life when wages were low and taxation high—there often was no food to be had. So nobody expected a meal, especially one out on the hillside. But when Jesus determined to miraculously provide a meal, he didn’t make it simple by handing out pre-packaged peanut butter and crackers. Instead he told the disciples to have the people sit down—actually the Greek word is anapesein which means “to recline”, signaling that this meal was going to be a banquet! Nobody expected it, but Jesus was throwing a feast! Most of these folks had never been to a fancy dinner party. They may have been to a Passover meal but that was as close as it got. They could only imagine the messianic banquet at the end of time when all would be fed, but for now nobody expected a meal there on the hillside.

3) Guidepost magazine tells a story of a young woman with a terminal disease who went to her pastor to tell him what scriptures and music she wanted used at her funeral. When everything else had been talked through she added, “And I want a dinner folk to be placed in my hand once I am in the casket so everyone can see it.”
The pastor questioned her about it and the young woman explained. My grandmother told me, "In all my years of attending socials and dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming...like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance!" So, I want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder "What's with the fork?" Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork...the best is yet to come." So if Jesus were preparing to serve the 5000 a meal today, he would say those same words, “Keep your fork…the best is yet to come.”

4) Well, the people ate and were satisfied and afterwards the leftovers far exceeded the original five loaves and two fish. Having witnessed a miracle, the people were beginning to get the message when they responded, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” Yet there is a “rest of the story.” Later on Jesus revealed to his disciples why he performed this miracle. In John it’s not so much about having compassion for the hungry people as modeling Jesus’ mission in life. For you see, the meal which nobody was expecting is what Jesus gives through his own body and blood on the cross. The bountiful meal on the hillside is none other than the redemptive meal of salvation that Jesus offers to those who will listen and wait expectantly for it. John, through his subtle changes, reminds us that Jesus is the Passover Lamb, he is the manna from heaven, he is the miraculous Thanksgiving meal where everyone leaves having eaten their fill and the extras are stored away for another time.

5) When people outside the church look at Christians today, do you suppose they are expecting anything? Some are sure what they’ll get is criticism, blame or holier than thou attitudes. Some may think that church is OK but not for them, while others will find it incredulous that the church is still around in a scientific age. But nobody expects a meal which is exactly why that’s what we need to be giving them! When people receive from the church something they don’t need to pay for or earn in some way, they begin to wonder. It’s like that fork in the casket—it makes a person want to ask, “What’s that all about?” Because not only do people not expect the church to care for them in a physical way, they have no idea that Jesus will care for them in a spiritual way as well!

6) Throughout the centuries the church has performed some miracles. People didn’t expect the church to create hospitals and orphanages and schools of higher learning but throughout the 18th, 19th & 20th centuries that’s a large part of what the church did even when we sometimes forgot to tell people why we did it. When we serve today, we must not forget to name the one for whom we serve and we must not forget to invite others into relationship with Jesus. Perhaps we could start by symbolically bringing a fork to every church meeting or worship service to remind us that God still has much work to do and “the best is yet to come!”