

10 Pentecost, Proper 12 Yr. B
July 29, 2018
John 6:1-21

This morning's Gospel tells the story of the feeding of 5,000 people. This feeding story is unusual in that it appears in each of the Gospels, the one story to do so. You'll note that there are actually three miracle stories in this reading, which begins by saying that Jesus was healing the sick, then tells the story of the loaves and fishes and concludes with a story about Jesus walking on the water. So, whatever else today's reading does, it certainly raises the question of miracles and how we understand them.

First, some context. When we read the Gospels one thing that may catch our attention is that, over and over, the writers tell us that large crowds were following Jesus. So, who were these people and how did they find the time to follow Jesus? As one person asked, didn't they have jobs? The short answer to that is that many of them didn't. At the time of this story, Palestine had three major cities and feeding the people in the cities was a problem. The rulers demanded that farmers either share a large portion of their crops or pay a tax on what they didn't share. Many of them, most of whom were small farmers, couldn't comply with the law and feed their families at the same time. There were some options. They could hire themselves out as day laborers, or they could borrow money. Historians tell us that those loans often had interest of 50-60%. It won't come as a surprise, then, to know that many of them lost their farms and many of them sold themselves into what was called debt slavery. It's estimated that at this time 2% of the people held 98% of the wealth. These crowds were not in that 2%; these were pretty desperate people.

This passage, as I mentioned, tells of miracles. What do we think about miracles in our time? Traditionally, miracles are seen as events that break, or at least suspend the laws of nature. In the pre-modern era, I'm guessing that miracles were simply accepted in that sense. But the post-Enlightenment mind has a bit more trouble with that. As scientific knowledge grows, things that were formerly seen as miraculous can now be explained, so we're in a situation sometimes called "the God of the

gaps” meaning that until we have more knowledge, or a better explanation, we simply let God fill the gap for the time being. So, I think there are several reactions to miracle stories – and no one can say that any reaction is wrong. On one level the reaction is WOW! I hope that happens to me! Another level is one that asks: HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? Another reaction is Hmmmm – is this true? But a couple of contemporary theologians that I respect suggest that we look at miracles as events that create wonder, events that are seen somehow as acts of God, or events that challenge us to ask WHAT’S THE MESSAGE HERE?

Using those questions, we can all agree that this event excited wonder. In John’s gospel, these events aren’t called miracles. Instead, they’re called signs – signs about who Jesus is, but also signs about who God is. The essential message then is that God is loving, and concerned about immediate needs as well as spiritual needs. And perhaps the message also is that there really is enough for everyone as long as we are willing to share.

So, looking more closely at the text. These people are following Jesus. They see him healing people, they’re hearing him preach. And, in this story, they’re a long way from home and it’s getting on to dinner time. As we listen, it’s instructive to see ourselves reflected in the story. First there’s Philip. He’s the cost/benefit analysis guy. In response to Jesus’ question, he looks out at the crowd, does a quick calculation and concludes that it’s hopeless. Then there’s Andrew who points out that one small person has offered to give up his five loaves and two fish but realizes that that is just a drop in the bucket. It reminds me of a story I heard once about the couple who started Habitat for Humanity. They were approached by some members of a church who said that they have saved some money to contribute toward the building of a Habitat house, but wondered how much they should have in the bank before they began - \$10,000? \$20,000?. Fuller replied by telling them that under no circumstances should they begin until they had a least ONE DOLLAR in the bank. Small effort, great trust – another message of this text. Perhaps there are two responses to great need: one is paralysis and hopelessness; the other is open to possibilities: Let’s see what we can do with what we have.

This text can also be interpreted as a story about the difference between scarcity and abundance. Philip looks at the crowd and sees scarcity: THERE'S NOT ENOUGH. But Jesus sees God's abundance and sees possibility. When the disciples look out what they see is an absence of picnic baskets; what Jesus sees is people's hearts and knows there's enough for everyone.

This is a different way of looking at what happened, but it's no less miraculous. Perhaps when people saw the little kid offering what he had, they remembered that they hadn't started off from home with nothing; no one would go off that way, so they had something in their pockets, but it wasn't enough to share. BY MYSELF I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH. But then, seated together on the grass, looking at each other, perhaps talking with each other about how they came to be there, they were moved to pull out whatever they had and it was enough. Some people scoff at this interpretation, but I think getting people to share what they have is a miracle in and of itself.

Do you remember the folk tale about Stone Soup? A traveler arrives in a village asking for something to eat. It's a time of famine, a time of scarcity and the villagers have hidden what they have, wary of each other, but especially wary of strangers, so they refuse to offer any hospitality. Then the stranger says that'll he just go ahead and make his own soup, out of a stone. He gets a kettle, fills it with water, put it over a fire in the town square and plunks in a stone. Curious, everyone gathers around. After a bit, he tastes it, says it's good, but no doubt it would be better with a little salt. One of the villagers gets some salt and people begin tasting it, offering opinions as to what would improve the soup and contributing a carrot here, a potato there. You know the ending: when all was said and done there was enough for everyone, with leftovers to take home.

Let me add to that a contemporary and true version. It's told by the Quaker theologian, Parker Palmer. He was returning from a conference and was on a 6 a.m. flight, which was delayed because the truck bringing the coffee and snacks had broken down. They waited a bit, but then the pilot said, "We're going to take off without the coffee, so we can get you to Detroit on

time.” Palmer says that he was sitting up front with the “road warriors,” a surly bunch at that hour and without coffee yet! But then he says, “Once we got into the air, the lead flight attendant stood in the aisle with her mic and said, “Good morning! We’re flying to Minneapolis today at an altitude of 30 feet...” which evoked more scorn from the road warriors. Then she said, “Now that I have your attention, I know you’re upset about the coffee. Well, get over it! Start sharing your stuff with your seatmate. That bag of five peanuts you got on your last flight and put it your pocket? Tear it open and pass them around! Got gum or mints? Share them! You can’t read all the sections of your paper at once. Offer them to each other! Show off the pictures of your kids and grandkids you have in your wallets!” As she went on, people began laughing and doing what she had suggested. A surly scene turned into summer camp. An hour later, when she passed his seat, Palmer commended her for how she’d handled the situation. And she quietly replied, “THE LOAVES AND FISHES ARE NOT DEAD.”

At the end of the Ephesians reading this morning, Paul gives glory to the God who, he says, by the power of work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. In this Gospel story as told in the Synoptics, Jesus turns to the disciples then, and to us now, and says, **YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.**

Here’s a closing prayer, a Franciscan blessing:

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

That's quite a prayer; do we dare pray it?

Amen.