

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN FOR ALL TO SEE

-a sermon based on Matthew 14:13-21

Text: "Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat'. The disciples replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And Jesus said, 'Bring them here to me'."

(Matthew 14:16-18)

This year the Sundays in July are a feast of parables. For the most part Jesus tells these parables so that we may hear what the kingdom of heaven is like. But this Sunday is different because the feeding of the five thousand isn't a parable told in order to be heard, but a parable acted in order to be seen and, once seen, to be re-enacted over and over again.

Picture the scene: a great crowd has followed Jesus on foot in hopes of catching a glimpse of him and hearing him speak. They are hungry for his teaching, hungry for his healing touch, and they are not disappointed. Jesus has compassion on them and cures the sick among them. But time is passing, and Jesus' disciples start to worry about another kind of hunger. "The hour is now late," they say. "Send the crowds away to buy food for themselves." A sensible enough suggestion, but Jesus' reply is not what they expect: "You give them something to eat."

You can imagine the look of consternation on their faces: "We've nothing here but five loaves and two fish." Hardly enough for their own needs, and certainly not enough for the hungry multitude all around them. But when Jesus says, "Bring them here to me", they do what he asks. He takes what has been offered and asks God to bless it:

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

And then he breaks the loaves and gives the pieces to the disciples who distribute them to the crowd. And we’re told that “all ate and were filled”, and that there were enough pieces of bread left over to fill twelve baskets. As we sang right before this sermon:

“O truth of heaven, be the food
our souls delight to eat and share,
and feed the present multitude
with bread enough, and bread to spare.”
(“Creative Lord, you own the fields”, v.4)

What is there to be seen in this parable acted out by the Sea of Galilee?

First, there is the compassion of Jesus – compassion for the ordinary folk gathered around him, hungry and needing to be fed in body, mind and spirit.

Then there is the gratitude of Jesus – gratitude for what the disciples have to offer. Little indeed, but our little is always a great deal when offered to God for his blessing and use: “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.”

And, most noticeable of all, there is the dependence of Jesus – dependence on the disciples’ readiness to hear him and heed him and help him. That is why the feeding of the multitude in today’s gospel reading isn’t a supernatural event or a nine-day wonder. Instead it is an everyday miracle in which the impossible happens through people like ourselves being willing to hear and heed and help Jesus in his work of feeding the hungry. Feeding those who are physically hungry, those who are spiritually hungry, those who hunger for peace and justice, for loving care and protection of the earth entrusted to us, and for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The hungry fed – that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

There is another parable about feeding to be re-enacted here this morning for all to see. It will happen when bread and wine are brought forward to be offered to God and the familiar words of the Great Thanksgiving are said over them:

“He took bread, and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take, eat’ Likewise, he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink this, all of you’.”

And as we re-enact this parable together, we remember – and how much \there is to remember: the feeding of the multitude; the Last Supper on the night of Jesus’ betrayal; the one hundred thousand successive Sundays when bread has been taken and blessed, broken and shared so that ordinary men and women like ourselves might be strengthened to serve as God’s people here on earth. The hungry fed – that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

“Strengthened to serve as God’s people here on earth”: you and I are called to re-enact today’s parable outside these walls. To re-enact it every day of our lives, sometimes together, but more often in the setting of our individual lives. In 2009, for the first time in history, the number of hungry people in the world rose to more than a billion, some of them here in this country. And there are many in this country right now who are spiritually hungry, suffering from a deficiency of hope and meaning and purpose. People living what Henry David Thoreau once called “lives of quiet desperation”. You can see this written on the worn faces of men and woman in Norwich and New London, in Shoprite and the Big Y and in Walmart. Meanwhile there are determined efforts underway in Washington to remove from under them the few safety nets they have left. Where in all of this is the compassion of Jesus?

As the love of God transforms our natural selfishness into generous sharing, there are a hundred different ways we can follow Jesus' lead and act with his compassion. Prayers can be offered, programs of relief supported, petitions signed, protests joined, people helped individually, both nearby and far away. And when it seems that what we can do is but little in the face of the needs all around us, remember the loaves and fishes. Remember that our little can become a great deal when offered to God gratefully for his blessing and use.

“Redeeming Love, you call the least
to leave [their] barren life and land;
you welcome all to come and feast,
to share the supper love has planned.

We are not worthy, gracious Lord,
of banquets sanctified with prayer,
yet nourish us with wine outpoured,
with bread enough, and bread to spare.”
(vv. 5-6)

“With bread enough and bread to spare”, here at St. Ann's and around the world. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Amen

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