

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 3, 2008.

Proper 13 Year A Matthew 14:13-21

Hear again these words from the Gospel according to Matthew: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled. And they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." The miracle feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story recorded in all four of the Gospel accounts. Apart from the resurrection, it is probably THE miracle story of the Christian faith. This story summarizes the message heard over and over again in scripture and seen over and over again in the experience of faithful Christians through the centuries. The message is this: where we see limited resources, God sees unlimited possibilities. My thanks to Biblical scholar, Leander Keck, for this succinct description of what is going on in this miracle story: "limited resources, unlimited possibilities."

Limited resources. In so many ways, the details leading up to the miracle describe what we might call today "a logistical nightmare." Jesus has just heard about the execution of his cousin, John the Baptist, and he withdraws in a boat on the lake to get away by himself to a deserted place. But of course, someone sees Jesus heading off and so the crowds, thousands of people, figure out where he's going and get there by foot before he does. The first problem is that this party is unplanned. The crowds show up spontaneously, but Jesus, compassionate Jesus, cures the sick. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, see trouble brewing. Not only is this party unplanned, it is going late, and there is no food. They are in the middle of nowhere, so there are no bathrooms either. Talk about a logistical nightmare. This crowd might start to get grumpy soon. So the disciples tell Jesus to send the people away to the villages to buy food for themselves. Jesus has another plan. This is what educators often refer to as a "teachable moment." Sure, the people could go buy food for themselves, but Jesus wants to teach them another way. He says, "they need not go away, you give them something to eat." Why spend money when you could just share what you have? The disciples are baffled. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," (not enough for us much less a crowd of thousands). There is not enough, they protest. Not enough. Limited resources.

"Not enough" is a phrase we hear a lot in these days of economic downturns and housing market declines and home loan foreclosures. There is not enough money to pay the rent. There are not enough jobs. Not enough gas to get us where we want to go on vacation. Not enough food to feed families. Not enough. We live in a time of limited resources. Some days, it seems like a logistical nightmare. Our response as a culture has not been all that different from the response of the disciples. If people are hungry, then we need to figure out a way for them to buy food for themselves. So we see articles all over the media about how to save money, how to stretch the dollar, how to find good deals, how to take care of ourselves with money. The government has responded to the situation by sending us economic stimulus checks, with the hopes that we will indeed go into the villages and buy food and appliances and gas for ourselves. These responses are sensible. Being thrifty is good. A little extra spending money is good. But we, as people of faith, need to be careful. The world is telling us there is "not enough." The world is telling us we need more than we have in order to be happy. But Jesus has a different message: limited resources, unlimited possibilities.

Jesus tells the disciples to give the crowds something to eat. Sure, they could go away and buy something, but what about finding a way to stay in community and share? Sure, there is an economic answer to this logistical nightmare, but Jesus wants to reveal something much more powerful and exciting. It is a teachable moment, a kingdom moment, a moment when Jesus is going to take an ordinary problem and turn it into an extraordinary solution. “Bring me the loaves and the fish,” says Jesus. He commands the crowds to sit down on the grass. The Greek word for sit down actually means more like recline, lean on one elbow, as if you were at a royal banquet. Jesus is setting the stage, getting everyone ready for the royal kingdom feast that is about to begin. The story continues, “Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.” Jesus takes the food, he blessed it, he broke the loaves, and gave it to the disciples to distribute. Sound familiar? It sounds a lot like the actions of the last supper. It is likely that the writer of Matthew wanted it to sound this way. The feeding of the five thousand, like the story of the last supper, is about God taking ordinary materials and turning them into something extraordinary. Five loaves and two fish become food for five thousand. Bread and wine become the body and blood of a savior. Limited resources are transformed, revealing unlimited possibilities.

I want to be careful here not to oversimplify the parallels between this miracle story and the economic hardships so many people are facing today. It would be cruel to tell people who are watching their children starve to death in Africa that all they need to do is offer their meager rations to God and receive a feast. It would be arrogant to tell the woman who just lost her house to foreclosure to simply offer what is left of her savings and God will make her a mansion. That would be arrogant, because I do not know what God is going to do. The message of this story is not that God always will work such miracles. The message is that God can work such miracles. The message is that God has the power to transform our limited resources into unlimited possibilities. There is the possibility that God will feed thousands with five loaves and two fish. There is also the possibility that God will do something else completely unexpected. Our job is not to predict what God will do. Our job is to believe that God can do more than we can ask or imagine. Our job is to challenge the message of the dominant culture, the “not enough” message, with the message of Jesus Christ, the message of the Eucharist, the message which says, “take, bless, break, and give.” Take what we have, O God, limited as it is, bless it, break and transform it, so that we may give it to others. We offer our pitiful resources and we give thanks (remember that the word, Eucharist, means thanksgiving). We ask for God's blessing. We divide and share what God gives back to us. That is the message we, the church, have for the world. In the midst of scarcity, in the midst of “not enough,” God has taught us to give thanks. The “not enough” message only leads to anxiety and fear. The message of Christ, the message of the Eucharist leads to the hope that what little we have can be taken, blessed, broken, and given for the world. We still take those practical steps to make the best of what we have. We do not forget to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. We also say to the world that the very best we can do with what we have is offer it to God, because with God limited resources can become unlimited possibilities.

I'd like to close with a story about offering limited resources that happened to me this past week. It is certainly not as impressive as the feeding of the five thousand, but perhaps it brings the ideas I have been talking about down to a level we can relate to. I was having one of “those” days, not exactly a logistical nightmare, but a day where everything was taking longer than it should. I was not feeling very productive and was just having trouble getting from point A to point B.

About 1 o'clock in the afternoon, I was driving between appointments on opposite sides of town and realized that I was very hungry. If I was going to eat something, I would have to stop and buy some food. I usually bring my lunch, but I had not done so that day. I happened to be passing a burrito place and stopped. My plan was to get something to go and wolf it down in the car on the way to his next meeting. As I got my food, though, and the question came, "for here or to go?" something told me to just take an extra five minutes and eat at the restaurant. I sat at the table, not exactly "reclining" but trying to make myself comfortable. I thought about the story of the loaves and the fishes and was inspired to take a deep breath and then offer up my limited resources: my lack of productivity, my crazy day, my nutritionally deficient burrito. Take this burrito, God. Take what I have and just bless it. Thank you. I had eaten only a bite or two when a stranger approached me. "Are you an Episcopal priest?" she asked. I was wearing my collar. The woman said she was a lapsed Episcopalian and had not been to church in a long time but that she was really interested in what was going on with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference. We had a nice conversation, and I reassured her that there are a lot of Episcopalians out there who have not been to church in a long time, but that it was never too late and she would certainly be welcome at St. Luke's anytime. The woman apologized for interrupting my lunch but just wanted to share one more story. Her twenty-five year old son in California had called her to say that although he had a great job, a great place to live, and a wonderful girlfriend, he felt like there was something missing in his life. "Have you thought about going to the little Episcopal church near your house?" she had asked. "Well he called and told me that he actually started going to the church. He not only started going to services, but he joined a book group!" she told me. At a time when it seemed like there was "not enough," he was finding fulfillment in the Eucharist and in Christian community. I genuinely shared in the woman's joy (it's not every day you hear about a twenty-five year old man following his mother's advice, going to church, and joining a book group...a minor miracle in itself!), and she was on her way. As I finished my burrito, I realized that God had worked a small miracle. In the midst of fast food and busy schedules, a priest and a stranger had a conversation about God and gave thanks for a young man's return to the church. It was not a feeding of the five thousand, but I think we both received a little bit extra. Taken, blessed, broken, and given. Give thanks for limited resources and unlimited possibilities. Amen.