

August 2, 2020

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

The Disciples in the Work of Christ

Galilee must have been a place where it was exceedingly difficult to be alone. To have received the terrible news of John's gruesome death, all Jesus wanted was to be alone. Galilee being a small country, and within that small country there were 204 towns and villages, none with a population of less than 15,000 people. It was not easy to get away from people for any length of time.

All Jesus wanted was to step away from it all by himself, tending to his own grief, his own fear at what this must mean for himself, for the world that such as this could ever happen. That John's life could be abruptly cut short by the guilt, the fear, the callous hearts of the privileged powerful.

On the other side of the lake was quiet, and at its widest the lake was only eight miles wide. Jesus' friends were fishermen, and it was not difficult to embark on one of their boats and seek rest and quiet.

There are three simple and natural reasons why Jesus should seek to be alone. He was human and he needed rest. He never recklessly ran into danger, and it was best to withdraw and avoid the possibility of sharing John's fate too soon. And most of all, with the cross coming nearer and nearer, Jesus knew that he must meet with God before he

met with men and women. He was seeking rest for his body and strength for his soul in the lonely places.

But he was not to get it. To have been called away from that quiet place too soon only to be met by a crowd of thousands with all their aching need on full display. It would have been easy to see the boat set sail and to deduce where it was going; and the crowds flocked round the top of the lake and were waiting for him at the other side when he arrived. So, Jesus healed them and, when evening came, he fed them before they took the long road home.

According to Professor Barclay in “The Gospel of Matthew” writes ‘that few of Jesus’ miracles are so revealing as this:

1. It tells us of the compassion of Jesus. When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion to the depths of his being. That was a very wonderful thing. Jesus had come to find peace and quiet and loneliness; instead, he found a vast crowd eagerly demanding what he could give. He could have resisted but Jesus was not like that. Does this not tell us that we must never be too busy for people, and we must never even seem to find them a trouble and a nuisance.’
2. ‘We see Jesus witnessing that all gifts are from God. He took the food and he said a blessing. Here we see Jesus showing that it is

God's gifts which he brings to men and women. The grace of gratitude is rare enough towards others; it is rarer still towards God.'

3. 'This miracle informs us very clearly of the place of the disciple in the work of Christ. The story tells that Jesus gave to the disciples and the disciples gave to the crowd. Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples that day, and he still does.'

'Without a doubt, take whatever measure of fear Jesus must have been feeling and multiply that over again and again. For you will notice that Jesus went off by himself to regroup, to pray, to be filled again. And yet, from what we know of them so far, I cannot imagine that the disciples did the same. Rather, I can just see them huddled together in Jesus' absence, telling, and retelling the gruesome details of John's untimely, unjust demise until they have worked themselves into a fever pitch of anxiety. Of terror. No wonder then that when they catch up with Jesus that their imaginations are spent and all they can think to do is send that unending crowd away' writes Rev. Janet Hurt in her commentary "The Miracle".

What must it be for them when Jesus insists that they feed that endless crowd instead?

Rev. Hurt adds; 'Just picture them if you will, this massive gathering of hungry folks: individuals, families, neighbors, indeed whole neighborhoods who took the day and made their way to the shore to encounter Jesus, this healer, to receive the sort of gift they could not have hoped to receive this side of whatever God has in store. With thousands of them there, perhaps it was so that only those who got 'front row seats' had any real idea of the wonder that was playing out before them, for them. Unless, of course, those others passed along not only bread and fish but the story of this miracle playing out before their eyes, satisfying their deeper hunger in a way that simple bread and fish never really could.'

It would be easy to be discouraged by a task of such magnitude. But there is something in this story that may lift up our hearts. When Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd, they told him that all they had was five loaves and two fishes; and yet with what they brought to him, Jesus achieved his miracle. Jesus sets every one of us the tremendous task of communicating himself to others; but he does not demand from us what we don't possess. He tells us to come to him as we are, bring me what you have, and I will use it greatly in my service. Little is always much in the hands of Christ.

Professor Barclay adds; 'At the end of the miracle, there is that strange little touch that the fragments were gathered up. Even when a miracle could feed people sumptuously, there was no waste. There is something to note here. God gives to us with generosity, but a wasteful extravagance is never right. God's generous giving and our wise using must go hand in hand.'

Then, there are those who believe the greater miracle would have been if the people who had planned ahead and packed a lunch had opened their picnic baskets, cracked open their coolers, and simply shared what they had brought with those nearby until everyone: family and stranger, friend and neighbor alike had been fed with food to spare. Indeed, there are those who believe that this is what actually happened that day when all those crowds of people showed up to see Jesus. This may be so, although the story is not told in this way. And yet? Perhaps this understanding points to a deeper learning for us now after all.

I love the way that Professor Barclay breaks down the scripture passage that I can really understand and relate to. He explains that there are three ways in which we can look at this miracle.

1. 'We may look at it as a simple multiplication of loaves and fishes. That would be very difficult to understand and would be

something which happened once and never repeated itself. If we regard it that way, let us be content; but let us not be critical and judgmental of those who feel that they must find another way.'

2. 'Many people see in this miracle a sacrament. They have felt that those who were present received only the smallest morsel of food, and yet were strengthened for their journey and were content. They have felt that the meal where they ate the spiritual food of Christ. If that is so, this is a miracle which is re-enacted every time we sit at the table of the Lord; for there comes to us the spiritual food which sends us out to walk with firmer feet and greater strength the way of life which leads to God.'
3. 'There are those who see in this miracle something which in a sense is perfectly natural, and yet which in another sense is a real miracle, and which in any sense is very precious. Picture the scene. There is a crowd; it is late; and they are hungry. But was it really likely that the vast majority of that crowd would set out around the lake without food at all? Would they not take something with them, however little?'

Rev. Hurt continues in her commentary 'We are called to give the gifts of God away even as Jesus did, all while carrying in our hearts our own grief and terror in a world which is not so far different from the

one where an innocent truth teller could be so gruesomely murdered at the hands of calloused privilege. Again, as Jesus did and does.'

'Indeed, even as I write, all across our nation hundreds are lined up to receive tests of which it appears there are still not enough. Or whose results are so delayed as to make them essentially worthless. And hundreds more wait in their cars to receive boxes of food to feed their families who would otherwise go hungry.'

'Hospitals — no, not hospitals, but human beings with breaking hearts like yours and mine — are having to make unthinkable decisions about who to treat and who will simply be sent home to die.

Countless folks who are unemployed due to this pandemic are on the brink of being evicted, unable to make rent and uncertain as to when or if help will come.'

'And yes, sad to say too many of our neighbors are unwilling to make the simple sacrifice of putting on a mask: unable, I suppose, to recognize that the act of doing so could well save a life, or countless of lives.'

It is into this world that along with those first followers of Jesus, you and I are called to pick up the gifts of God and move into the crowd (appropriately distanced and masked of course!) and give away what we have been given to give. We both step out of and into and through

our own fear, our own grief, and sometimes, yes, our own doubt or skepticism that the gifts will hold up long enough to reach everyone who is hungry. We do this because of and in spite of everything that has brought us to this point.

Yes, the story goes that Jesus picked up a meager lunch and blessed it and thousands were fed. Perhaps this was exactly how it happened then. But wouldn't it be something now, wouldn't the miracle be just as great or even greater, if everyone within the sound of Jesus' voice were to do the same?

Can't you imagine that there would be enough of everything for everyone if we all just gave away from what we have, trusting that God will provide, as God always has?

While I cannot say that it happened that way so long ago, I am certainly with those who believe that would be all the 'miracle' the world would need today. And just like so long ago, with baskets full left over!

I would wonder with you now. Where are and how have you experienced the miracle of this multiplying, this sustenance, this providing so that there is enough with room to spare?

How has this miracle come alive for you?

How have you known God's abundant provision and how have you been called to pass the gifts along?

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Pastor Karen