

**Proper 13A, August 2 2020 St. Anne's
Genesis 32:22–31; Psalm 17:1–7, 15; Romans 9:1–5; Matthew 14:13–21**

The story of Jesus feeding the multitudes is the *only* miracle story found in all four gospels, so clearly it was important to the early church. A lot of us in the modern world have a problem with the very *idea* of ‘miracles’ and so want a *rational* explanation for what ‘really happened’. But while *modern* people debate whether Jesus *literally* suspended the natural order of the world to feed the thousands, or whether his example simply prompted the people in the crowd to *share* what they already had with them, in Jesus’ *own* day miracles were accepted as part of reality. Indeed, in Jesus’ day there were *numerous* people who were acclaimed as ‘wonder workers’. Neither Jesus nor his early followers would ever have imagined that stories about wondrous acts might be seen as any kind of indication of divine origins. Rather, at that time miracles or ‘wonders’ were seen as *signs* to show the character of *God* – who is, of course, the one who’s actually doing the wonders – and to affirm that God **supports** the wonder worker (Jesus in this case). So, much as **we** like to have the ‘how’ questions answered I think the more important question to ask ourselves is ‘why’. Not so much why Jesus did this, but why was *this* particular story so important to the early church? There are stories of Jesus healing people and even bringing them back from the *dead* that are only included in *some* gospels and not others. So what does **this** story reveal about God, about Jesus, and about who **we** are called to be in the world, that **all** of the evangelists said, “Hey, now *that* story is definitely one they need to hear!”

Well, one reason that this miracle more than any other might have been important to the early church is that this one speaks to our central experience in Christian worship – *this* is a miracle where Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives the bread – all of which is familiar to Christians from Eucharist. Another reason this particular event

might have stood out for the early church is that it cuts to the heart of what it means to live as children of God. The Roman world Jesus and his followers lived in was marked by *huge* inequality in having access to food - and enough *nutrition* in the food you **did** get to be healthy. While the ruling elite had abundance beyond their ability to even *use*, the vast bulk of the people struggled on a daily and seasonal basis just to get enough food to stay **alive**. And the biblical tradition *explicitly* says that it's God's will that hungry people be **fed**. So, this is a story that cut to the heart of people's experience of the world and their relationship with a God who **cares** about those who are in need. But, I think there's also a sense that this story sums up discipleship as not just being about 'following' but *participating* and that's an important part of being a Christian in **every** age.

I suspect most of us can sympathize with the disciples in this story. There *we* are, out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a huge crowd. We've been here for **hours**. It's late, we're tired, we're hungry - it's time to go home. 'Come on, Jesus - these people need to go and get themselves something to eat!' But the disciples' suggestion that these people go buy food isn't just unrealistic - they are, after all, out in a deserted place - it's *ridiculous*... the folks making up these desperate crowds probably mostly didn't have any money to *buy* food in the first place even if there had been someplace for them to buy it. Which there wasn't.

So Jesus, as he so often did, turns the tables. "**You** give them something to eat," he said. Well, wasn't that ridiculous too! As if the disciples had secretly stowed away the *mountain* of food needed to feed all those people! We can imagine them looking at each other and shaking their heads. The disciples then say what **we** all-too-frequently say *ourselves* when faced with the enormity of something: "**We can't** do *that!* We don't have *enough*. All we have is these five measly little loaves and 2

miserable little fish.” Which, to be fair, was **not** enough even for the *twelve*, let alone a vast crowd. The disciples can only see the hopelessness of the situation. But then, Jesus takes what they have, small and inadequate as it *is*, and *makes* it **enough**. Enough not only to give them ‘something’ to eat. But as the Greek makes clear, enough to give everyone **all they needed** – all they **wanted!** *Overwhelming* abundance!

But I think the important point we need to notice is that Jesus **doesn’t** do it alone. Even when the **disciples** would rather look after themselves, Jesus uses them, and what they have, to meet the needs of this crowd. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper, this story depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity – “*all* we have is five loaves and 2 fish” – to one of abundance – “*thank you*, God, for these five loaves and 2 fishes.” Whatever their initial skepticism or self-preoccupation, to give them credit, the disciples then take what there **is**, even though it’s clearly inadequate, and start to distribute it. And, find it’s **enough**. It’s through the work of the *reluctant* disciples that God cares for these poor and hungry people. Maybe **that’s** the *second* part of the miracle. God can use **even us** to do great things!

This story shows us that what is small and insignificant in the face of this world’s need can, when offered to *God*, be multiplied to provide what’s needed. Our world is **full** of people who are hungry in many, many ways. Hungry for community, hungry for love, hungry for God and *literally* hungry for food and housing and all the basic necessities of life. Jesus says to **us** ‘feed my people.’ And our response tends to be that of the disciples, ‘How could **we** ever feed them?’ We can’t *afford* it. It isn’t in the budget. The problem is too big. Let’s form a committee and look at the options. All *we* have is these 5 crummy little loaves and these 2 measly little fish.

But, **we** are the body of Christ in today's world and Jesus calls **us** to look *past* our fears of 'how' we are going to do ministry and our desire to hold on tightly to what we have. To take what God has given to **us**, and trust in God's abundance enough to **share** it generously. Because to truly **be** followers of Jesus we need to practice letting go of *our* sense of *scarcity* and trust in **God's** abundance. This story challenges us to offer what seemingly meagre resources we have – time, expertise, finances, friendship, creativity, compassion – and give them to Jesus to bless so we can use them to help make the world better for us **all**. We just need the courage to start! We may not be able to see the ending - in fact most of the time we *can't* - but we **can** trust that God will be working *with* us. For the disciples in this story, the only *logical* thing to do was to send that hungry crowd away. They could not, at first, have fathomed the *possibility* that all those growling stomachs would be satisfied with what *began* with such meager resources. But, they trusted Jesus enough to hand him the five loaves and two fish anyway... and pretty soon it was a party.

That's what discipleship **is** – taking what we *have* and what we **are**, and offering it to **God**. We just need to get past worrying about how *little* we think we have and begin instead to think about what we **can** offer. *Individually*, we **can't** end world hunger. *Individually* we can't offer community to **all** the lonely, or love to **all** the loveless, or offer a way to God for all those who need faith. But we **can** take our gifts and join together in giving them into God's hands - and thereby multiply them into an embarrassment of riches that **will** allow us to reach out to a hungry world. We just have to be willing to trust God and give what we do **have** to start - whether we feel like we have 'enough' or not.