

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. 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.

I'll begin with a children's story. Versions of this story are told in many cultures. The story has, in it, some aspects of our Gospel reading, this morning. The story is entitled '*Bone, Button, Borscht*'. I am sure some of you know it. Let me show you the book's cover.

Here's a synopsis of the story:

One dark Winter night, a ragged little beggar hobbled along a lonely road. In his head is the image of a place with a blazing fireplace and a table loaded with food: borscht, noodle pudding, roast chicken, fruit and a jug of wine. He thinks, 'Ah, there is nothing like being a beggar. Such good things happen to people. They share. They give. And me? I get a little something too. It's perfect!'

On a cold, snowy winter evening, he walks into the village. There are no lights on in the houses and no sight of people. He knocks on the doors of several houses and says, at each one, "Please, a little food for a poor starving beggar." But, at each one, someone answers, "Go away!"

"What's wrong with these people," he wonders.

Finally, he finds one with a door partly open and a crack of light showing, so he opens it and walks in. It's a synagogue. He spies the shamas, a caretaker. "Shalom alacheim! peace be with you." But he doesn't answer. So, the little beggar has an idea.

He slowly removes four bone buttons from his coat. The shamas watching becomes curious. The little beggar tells the shamas, that he can perform a miracle

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by making a pot of borscht soup with his five bone buttons.

The little beggar further persuades the shamas that with just one more button, he can even make soup for the whole village. So, even though he is skeptical the shamas goes, first, to the Tailor's house and asks for a bone button so the little beggar can perform a miracle. The tailor remarks, "What's he going to do? Raise it from the dead?" But the shamas persuades him and several others to bring their bone buttons to the synagogue. Eventually, the whole town, men, women and children go to the synagogue bringing with them a soup pot, bowls, a ladle and spoons. They all want to partake in the miracle.

They say to the little beggar, "so, Mr. Miracle man! Make us a miracle!"

The beggar puts the pot on the stove, pours in water and puts the buttons in the pot. After it boils, he tastes it.

"How is it?"

"It's good, but it could be better."

"What would make it better?"

"A little sugar, salt and pepper" he replies. And, they bring some.

So, on it goes with the beggar tasting and saying it could be better with pickle juice - then with garlic and soon, the people bring that and beets, cabbage, carrots, onions, beans and all kinds of vegetables, until the pot is full.

The people eat the soup and have a party, and they beg the little beggar not to leave the town. When he decides to go, they say "How can we make borscht without your magic buttons?" So, they make an exchange, giving him five metal buttons for the rest of his bone buttons.

Like our gospel reading, this children's story is about how sharing can make a miracle - a very human phenomenon.

But that's not a miracle is it? That is just human beings being generous, sharing what they have—even when it is not much. That is a whole crowd of people moving from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty - overcoming their fear of going hungry, giving up their need to protect their individual selves, thanks to the trickery of a little Beggar!

In reading today's gospel of the Feeding of the 5000 men and their families, I asked myself: 'Why was this story recorded in that long ago first century CE? Why did the author consider it so important?

It is remarkable that all four writers of the gospels include this story, each with their own unique version.

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Barbara Brown Taylor writes that quote “it was a story too important to leave out It was a story about Jesus’ ability to provide for their spiritual and human needs. When they were sick, Jesus healed them. When they were sad, Jesus blessed them. When they were hungry, Jesus fed them.” End of quote

Another point of view on what might have stimulated the gospel writers - or perhaps provoked them - to record it, was something that was happening in the life of their faith communities in the last quarter of the first century.

Like Jesus, they must have been weary from the sacrifices they had to continually make as they spread the faith in the villages and towns along the Mediterranean. Remember, Jesus has just come from hearing about the death of his cousin, John the Baptizer. He is depressed, weary; and, wanting to be alone. But the crowd of people who have been drawn to him, keep following him to this lonely, out of the way place. Perhaps the Gospel authors recorded this story because it helped restore their dignity in trying times.

Perhaps they were recalling God providing Bread, miraculously to people in need as told in their Hebrew scriptures. There are several reasons why this story was recorded.

Jesus may have wanted to be alone, but here they were in a distant place and his followers, 5000 men and their families had needs of their own. They were sick, sad and hungry. But Jesus didn't tell them to get lost. His heart went out to them and he spent the afternoon walking among them, laying his hands on them and saying the things they need to hear.

In the evening, his disciples, probably thinking that it was a time to take care of themselves, told Jesus to send everyone away to buy food in one of the nearby villages.

But Jesus thought differently. He somehow knew that the crowd needed to stay together. So, he says to his disciples,

“ No, they don't need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

“But Jesus, you are in charge! What do you mean we should feed them? All we have among us are five loaves of bread and two measly fish! And there are 5000 men and their families! We can't possible do what you say with what we have!” They were operating out of a sense of scarcity. But Jesus looked at the same thing the disciples did, and he saw plenty.

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Jesus blessed the food and asked his disciples to distribute it to the crowd who didn't realize that they were in for a miracle.

But, was it a miracle? There have been all sorts of speculation as to what actually happened in this gospel reading.

Scholars have argued over what actually happened here, ranging from: God overcoming the laws of nature - to it being a metaphor for the Eucharist. Let me present Barbara Brown Taylor's 'take' on the story. She writes that the crowd must have had a range of responses, such as disbelief, scornful laughter, embarrassment, and being 'touched' by the disciples handing over all that they had. And by what they saw as Jesus's simple confidence, that it would be enough.

Taylor writes, quote "I wonder if they didn't look at that small basket of food going around and feel the food hidden in their own pockets and feeling guilty. Because you know they had some — a bit of lamb wrapped in a grape leaf, a few raisins, a chunk of bread left over from breakfast. They might have been able to keep their own food for themselves if that bread basket had not come around, full of scraps, everyone so careful not to break off too much, everyone wanting Jesus' crazy idea to work so much that very carefully, very secretly, they all began to put their own bread in the basket, reaching in as if they were taking some out and leaving some behind instead. So, at the end, the disciples stared in amazement at twelve baskets full of bread, the leftovers from a meal that fed over five thousand that started off with five blessed and broken loaves and two fish." End of quote

But that's not a miracle is it? Like the villagers in *Bone Button and Borscht*, that is just human beings being generous, sharing what they have —even when it is not much. That is a whole crowd of people moving from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty - overcoming their fear of going hungry, giving up their need to protect themselves, of recognizing that in spite of the cultural differences, they are equally valued. That's not a miracle! Or, is it?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

"The problem with miracles is that we tend to get mesmerized by them, focusing on God's responsibility and forgetting our own. Miracles let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all."

"They don't need to go away," Jesus said. "You give them something to eat." Stop looking for someone else to solve the problem and solve it yourselves. Stop

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waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.” End of quote

Why has this story of the feeding of the 5000 men and their families endured to 2020?

We can see it in our experience with the covid-19 pandemic where so many people have stepped up to care and share. People like you and myself have taken responsibility to do what we are able, with God's help, to solve the problems that this virus brings.

Douglas Todd recently wrote this in the Vancouver Sun in a column entitled: 'Covid-19 Restrictions Test Faith Communities'. He writes,

“Ritually, communally, socially, it's tough for the faithful of all religions. But some hope that, even dealing with the bizarre isolation caused by a worldwide pandemic, inner spiritual growth is occurring. Sikhs, Muslims, Christians and others around the world are still feeding the hungry and aiding the poor.

Pope Francis has drawn attention to the 'many outstretched hands that we see today' amid the pandemic, remarking it is 'only when something happens that upsets the course of our lives do our eyes become capable of seeing the goodness of the saints 'next door.

Maybe paradox is occurring. Is it possible, at this difficult time when people of faith are enduring being physically thrust apart, they are coming closer together?” That's from Douglas Todd.

Regarding another emerging issue in our society, Tessa McWatt, a Canadian, has written an excellent book entitled. *Shame on Me*. You may have heard Sheila Rogers interview her on the CBC radion a couple of weeks ago. McWatt has an intercultural ancestry in Guyana that is Scottish, English, French, Portuguese, East Indian, Amerindian, African and Chinese. (that's a mouthful, isn't it?).

Her book opens with a scene in her grade three Toronto classroom during a discussion about race where the term 'negro' surfaces and a fellow student points to her. Where upon the teacher asks her 'What are you?' Tessa's reaction is to put her head down on her desk, ashamed that she could not define herself in the same way that others in the class could define themselves.

In the book she goes on to examine the parts of her body and holds up a mirror to the way culture reads all bodies in a manner that devalues her body. She asks

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“why, do we persist in thinking in terms of race when racism is killing us? Where do you find a sense of belonging in a world where discrimination over the colour of your skin, fear of blackness, identity politics and call-out culture vie with each other noisily, relentlessly and still lethally?”

She concludes her book by asserting that the question should not be ‘what am I?’ but ‘who am I?’ She recognizes that, as a particle physicist once told her, she is a ‘symphony’ of cultures that the term ‘race’, does not capture.

Her story also speaks to people of faith about systemic racism, which holds that one race is better than another. And, I think, our responsibility as Christians to stop waiting for a miracle, but, rather, to take action to overcome systemic racism. We need to value others, rather than judge them.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has widened to include other cultures being disadvantaged in our society. We can see on TV that it includes blacks, people of colour and indigenous peoples. It has become a cry for *everyone* to acknowledge to each other, that we must value each other, equally. It is also a cry for us, together, to help raise up those who are marginalized.

You may know that yesterday, August first was *Emancipation Day*, a day to honour the the Abolition of Slavery Act that was proclaimed in 1834 for the British Commonwealth.

Why has today's gospel story of the Feeding of the 5000 men and their families, endured? And, what does it have to say to us, the faith community of St. Catherine's? How does the children's story 'Bone Button Borscht', our collective experience with covid-19; and, the current attempt to erase racism relate to the story and ourselves?

I think it is a story of our times. It's about the 'kingdom of God' that Jesus so frequently mentions. As Ann Crosthwaith talked about in her homily, last week, it's about how God wants us to live. So, it is a reflection on the year 2020 just as much as it is a reflection on the first century CE.

-The Reverend Gary Hamblin, with credit to Joy Hamblin for helping me to clarify my, at times, murky thoughts, while preparing this homily!

Sources: Aubrey Davis, *Bone, Button Borscht*; Barbara Brown Taylor, *Heaven*; Tessa McWatt, *Shame on Me*; Fred Craddock et. al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year*.