

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 14:13-21
“Only Five Loaves and Two Fish”
Year A – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)
August 2, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

I'd like to share with you again these words from our Gospel Reading, “Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish” (Matthew 14:15-17).

This familiar story from the ministry of Jesus holds a distinctive place in Scripture. Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that is recorded in all four Gospels. And this demonstrates how important it was that the Gospel writers all included it, and it also demonstrates how important it still is to us today.

There is so much that could and, over time, should be said about this passage of Scripture. From the grief Jesus had just encountered having been rejected at his hometown, as well as receiving the news that his cousin, John the Baptist, had just been killed; to the withdrawing from the crowds to pray; to the compassion Jesus had on them when they followed him, healing and feeding multitudes of people, just as God had been doing for his people throughout the generations.

But today I'd like to call your attention to two particular scenes that contrast with each other and shed some light on this miracle. The first scene is after Jesus had spent the whole day healing and working miracles among the thousands of people who were following him. And when evening came, you can tell the anxiety of the disciples had reached a point where they needed to say something to Jesus.

The disciples saw that the crowd needed to eat. But they didn't know how to deal with that need, nor did they want to. They suggested to Jesus that he send the crowds away so they might tend to their own needs. But Jesus had a different plan. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat,” Jesus said to his disciples.

And that's what leads us to the first scene, the first picture in your mind I'd like you think about with this miracle. It's the scene of the disciples bringing to Jesus the tiny supply of food available to them, five loaves and two fish. Perhaps one disciple is holding the bread, another disciple the fish. The rest of the disciples, meanwhile, stand empty-handed and I might also say clueless.

As I thought about this first scene of this story, those two handfuls of bread and fish in the face of a hungry crowd of thousands of people seem to be the equivalent of the disciples pulling their pockets inside out to show Jesus they had nothing to offer but lint.

But then comes the second scene. The disciples are back before Jesus, after feeding the crowds, presenting him with food once again. But this time, there are no empty hands. Rather each disciple is using both hands to hold a basket, a basket overflowing with leftover pieces of bread and servings of fish. Twelve baskets in all, one for each of them, and each one containing more food than they had at the start. And in the background, the people of the crowd lean back in their places, their bodies well-nourished.

Looking at these scenes side-by-side, we see that the disciples first came to report their limitations to Jesus. They had nothing but five loaves and two fish. They meant this to be the proof that they couldn't do anything to meet the needs of others, and for that matter, neither could Jesus. However, instead, Jesus uses that same thing, the bread and the fish, as the proof that he can not only meet their needs, but oversupply them in such a way that is way out of proportion to the resources available.

“Bring them here to me,” Jesus said. And he demonstrated the greatness of his love and mercy and power. You see, this is what Jesus does. He not only meets our needs, he oversupplies us. When we come before God as poor, miserable sinners, we realize we have nothing to offer him. We turn our pockets inside out and reveal we come to him with nothing. But that's when God begins to work in amazing ways.

Martin Luther knew this well. On his deathbed, it is said his last words were, “We are beggars before God, this is true.” Here was a man who knew the poverty we humans have in our sin and our unrighteousness. We can only come before God as beggars, completely destitute.

But Luther also knew the great mercy and grace God has shown us through Jesus Christ. And Christ came not only to cancel the debt we owed on account of our sin by his sacrificial death, but he also graciously bestowed on us his righteousness. Jesus oversupplies us with life and salvation that is way out of proportion to the resources available. He takes sinners who are beggars with empty pockets, and makes saints that will dwell and feast with him for all eternity.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Because until that day, we live here in this world, where much work is still needed to be done. Work that may cause us to be anxious, or worried, or stressed. The work of our vocations. As a Christian. As a parent or grandparent. As a child or student. As a citizen and community member. As a neighbor.

Often times we, like the disciples, focus on our needs rather than on the needs of those around us. We ask Jesus to dismiss or take away problems instead of looking to him for a solution. Often times we, like the disciples, focus on our limitations, our inabilities, our shortcomings, and we bring them to Jesus meaning them to be proof that we can't actually do what he's asked us to do.

But Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” And he is able to take our limitations, our sins, our needs, our resources, our talents, our energy, our very lives, and he turns them into the proof that he can not only meet our needs and the needs of our neighbors, but oversupply us in such a way that is way out of proportion to the resources available.

You never know what seemingly small thing—a word, a moment you give someone, an offering, an encouragement, a prayer, a shared Scripture verse, a time you spend with a child or with a friend—you never know how Jesus will use that for your own good or the good of someone else. Because ultimately it's not you who does something with it. It's Jesus. That's what the disciples found out. When Jesus is in charge of the meal, there are always leftovers.

Jesus, who turned five loaves and two fish into a feast, has turned death on a cross into life from the grave. He has turned simple water into the saving flood of Baptism. He has turned bread and wine into his life-giving body and blood. He has turned sinners like us into his saints. And so, he invites you to bring these things to him, and then watch what he can do. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**