

May 9, 2010
Mark 6:30-44
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Help Wanted!

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE:

Today's gospel story is the feeding of the 5,000, which is the only miracle story found in all four gospels. This is not the lectionary reading of the day. However, I choose it because next week the children's musical— *A Table for Five... Thousand!* — is based on the John version of this story. Since this is such a prominent story in the gospels, I thought today we would look at the synoptic gospels' (Matthew, Mark, Luke) version of the story. They have a somewhat different slant. Since most scholars believe Mark was the earliest gospel compiled, I decided we'd read it from Mark.

SERMON

Food evokes strong memories and powerful emotions. I can still smell the mixture of marfax beans and blueberry pie baking in my grandmother's oven. Often when I meet with families to talk about a person who has died, the memories, of especially the grandchildren, have to do with family gatherings and the meals shared. What those grandchildren didn't realize at the time was all the work that went into preparing those festive occasions and sometimes the concern about whether there would be enough food.

How are we going to feed everyone? That question is often just below the surface in a nervous sort of way at potluck dinners and bean suppers. It is a regular question with more serious consequences for the people who work at Midcoast Hunger Prevention and Tedford Housing. It is the deeply troubling question asked by some mothers and fathers throughout Maine and around the world on a daily basis; for about one sixth of the world's population is hungry every day.

How are we going to feed everyone? That is the question haunting the disciples in today's story. They are already bone tired. In fact the story begins with Jesus' invitation to them to "come away to a lonely place and rest awhile." But the crowds won't leave them alone. The people follow them and then just keep staying and staying and staying. At the end of a long day, the disciples, in very Martha-like fashion, are focused on the practicalities of the situation — who is going to feed all these people?

This story of the feeding of the 5,000 is a prominent story in Christian tradition. In fact, it probably functioned as a mini gospel before the gospels as we know them were circulating. If people who had never heard of Jesus asked one of his followers to tell them about him, here is a story to tell. It is a story in which Jesus is portrayed as teacher and healer, comforter and

challenger, shepherd and provider, miracle worker and host at the ‘table’ – the metaphoric table on the shore, along with alluding to the Eucharistic table and hinting of the heavenly banquet. All by itself this story gives a powerful message of Jesus and of his care of the people. Yet, the writer of Mark ups the ante in his gospel by placing this story immediately after the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. (Matthew and Luke follow suit.) As you may remember it was King Herod, officially the king of the Jews, who has John beheaded. At his birthday feast, Herod promises a dancing girl anything she wants and at the request of her mother she asks for the head of John the Baptist. Herod complies. By putting these stories side by side, Mark poses a powerful juxtaposition regarding who is the real king of the Jews. On the one hand, we have Herod’s banquet, where sexual and power politics reign. On the other hand, there is Jesus’ banquet, where compassion and servant ministry reign. The implicit question is - which king will you follow?

Miracle stories, such as this story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, were not unusual in Jesus’ day. They fit in the worldview of the time and were told by people in all religious and secular traditions. Today, we are still intrigued by the facts of such stories. However, we often want a more rational explanation, which is the direction that the writer of the gospel of John takes, implying that the real miracle is that people are drawn out of their selfishness and share the food they have hidden away. We will hear more about that next week.

But for now, let’s return to the disciples. Jesus’ focused dialogue in this story is with the disciples not with the crowd.

As I mentioned earlier Jesus’ first statement to the disciples is an invitation to “come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile.” The disciples themselves are tired and hungry – *for many were coming and going, and they had no time even to eat.* As we learn later, the disciples apparently have five loaves and two fish to share among themselves. But they also need nourishment for the soul – a quiet place to regroup. Although it turns out the calm only lasts for the duration of the boat ride, it is essential.

Maybe you came here for just this reason today - rest for your soul. Maybe a traumatic happening has shocked you, as the news of John the Baptist shocked the disciples. Or maybe you just needed to leave the hustle and bustle of your daily life to enter into a set aside place where your body and spirit may be refreshed. Jesus invites us to “come away and rest.” It is essential in and of itself. And it is crucial for the challenge that is to come.

When Jesus and the disciples get off the boat, the crowds are already there, and Jesus turns to the crowd in compassion. When the day has grown long, the disciples come to Jesus and suggest he send the people away to buy themselves something to eat. A very prudent and reasonable solution to the situation.

Now Jesus could have said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.” Or he could have called a conference to study the situation. Instead his response is direct and simple, *You give them something to eat.*

It was like he held up a big sign

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In the face of the world's needs and traumas, we often find ourselves asking, "Where is God? How can God let this happen?" In today's story Jesus turns the question around and asks, "Where are you?" *You give them something to eat.*

Now of all the foolish ideas! The disciples only had five loaves and two fish. Such meager fare wouldn't even make a dent in that crowd. It was absurd. The situation was overwhelming. So, it's not surprising that the disciples' response is a downright edgy. "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them?" A denarri was a usual day's wage for a laborer. Yet, Jesus persists. "What do you have?" We'll use that.

Jesus blesses the loaves and fish and then gives the food to the disciples so that they may feed the people. Jesus works through the disciples to use what little they have to make a difference. God is at work through us. Now that's a miracle.

Our feelings of inadequacy often hold us back. People say, "I don't know enough to teach church school or be on that committee." Jesus says, "You give them something to eat." We don't know what to say or do for someone who has just experienced a trauma, so we may avoid them. *You give them something to eat.* And how can we ever make a dent in the overwhelming numbers of hungry people in the world. *You give them something to eat.*

Each person can make a difference. And a small group of focused people, like the disciples, can make an enormous difference. As Margaret Mead put it, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Loren Easley expressed it this way:

The Starfish Story

Original Story by: Loren Easley

*One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed
a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean.*

Approaching the boy, he asked,

"What are you doing?"

The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean.

The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

*"Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of
starfish?"*

You can't make a difference!"

*After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish,
and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said..."*

I made a difference for that one."

That is the philosophy of Heifer project. One gift of an animal makes a difference to one family. Then it multiplies, for that gift not only changes that family's life but they receive the privilege of passing the gift along. They are empowered to then *give someone else something to eat*.

Let us remember:
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