

Ninth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Loaves, Fish, Pennies, Minutes, Talents: Give Jesus Something to Multiply!"

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9; Matthew 14:13-21

August 1-2, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Jesus was like an Italian mother: always feeding people! A lot of people. Making it look easy. Preparing enough for an army, ensuring leftovers for everyone to take home. We're not going to call today's Gospel "The Feeding of the Five Thousand." It ends, "*And those who ate were about five thousand men, **besides women and children.***" (Matt. 14:21) So Scripture scholars tell us the actual numbers were probably closer to **20,000**.

This is the **only one of Jesus' miracles** included in **all 4 Gospels**; variations of it are told **six** times. That gives it more than your average juju. Matthew is alone in setting the multiplication of loaves and fish in this especially troubling time. Jesus has just gotten news of John the Baptist's death. He is **headed off by Himself to grieve**, not simply to pray, as He often did, not simply to escape the crowds, lie low, let His battery recharge. To Jesus, John wasn't some distant celebrity he read about in the paper. John was a personal **someone** to Jesus. John had baptized Jesus, John had sent his followers to ask Jesus if He were the Messiah. Jesus had even chosen to echo John's message: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" (Matthew 3:1, 4:17) John had said of Jesus, "*I am not worthy to carry his sandals....*" (Matt. 3:11c) and Jesus had said of John:

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt. 11:11)

Jesus was grieving the loss of a friend. Deeply. This was what we now call "complicated grief":

John hadn't died in his sleep: John had been beheaded by "that fox," Herod Antipas.

But before Jesus got His chance to mourn,

... he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (Matt. 14:14)

Maybe you remember St. Mark's description of the same scene:

[Jesus] saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.... (Mark 6:34)

As the story progresses, this Good Shepherd heals and feeds His flock.

It didn't matter that the timing wasn't so good in Jesus' personal life, that He was sad and needed spiritual time to regroup, time He didn't get it. He met the needs of His people, regardless. That makes me think of something very wise Eleanor Roosevelt once said: "Most important things in this world are done by people who don't feel particularly well on the day they do them." (She knew, because she was one of those people!) What that former first lady, that force-to-be-contented-with, said is often true around here! I think of Fred Vogel showing up for Evangelism and Finance meetings with his oxygen tank in tow. I think of members of our women's circle and the crafters, Ruth Beers, Lilly Roberts, slowly but determinedly making their way on walkers into this building to make blankets for Church World Service. I think of church friends suffering with arthritis who don't let that prevent them from getting down on their knees and tending the garden. I think of our coffee hour and CareCorps hosts, lugging in food, beverages, decorations in the broiling heat of summer and the freezing cold of winter. Many of our Holy Trinity volunteers will affirm that "young and healthy" aren't prerequisites to serve around here! (But **all** the young and healthy **are** warmly welcomed to find your niche and pitch in! **More** volunteers in that category would be a great blessing to all of us and would allow us to deepen and broaden our ministries in the areas of music, Christian ed., evangelism, social ministry, stewardship!)

Picking up a theme from last weekend: sometimes we're tempted to think that as individuals we can't contribute enough money, time, or talent to make a difference, to make the

effort worthwhile. But today's Gospel contradicts that lie the devil tells to diminish us in our own eyes and to **prevent** us from giving **anything**. Picture the scene: Jesus has spent all day healing folks. The shadows are now lengthening and the disciples are anxious to disperse the crowd, clear the place out, so they can have their own dinner and enjoy a little peace and quiet. They whisper to Jesus: "Tell them to beat it and find their own grub,". And He answers:

"...you give them something to eat." (Matt. 14:16c)

They immediately protest:

*"We have **nothing** here...."*

*"... **but** 5 loaves and 2 fish,"* (Matt. 14:17b)

which to them may as well **be** nothing, confronted with thousands of hungry people.

Jesus says, "*Bring them here to me,*" and we're off to the races. Our Lord didn't ask His Father to rain down literal manna from heaven. He could have. But instead He told His friends to **do something, to exert some effort** on behalf of their brothers and sisters. Jesus still works that way. He tells us to **do something, to exert loving effort** on behalf of our brothers and sisters. Then He blesses and amazingly multiplies what we bring. God doesn't wave a magic wand and produce food or money or song or lesson plans or a beautiful garden or cookies for the homebound or a meal for a grieving family *ex nihilo*, from nothing. God starts with what **we** bring to the table: our voice, our wallet, our intellect, our faith story, our numbers know-how, our thirst for justice, our eye for beauty, our public speaking ability, our concern for those live alone.

I was reading a column this past week about the legacy of the civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis, who recently died. In the 60's Lewis was a young protégé of Martin Luther King, Jr. Lifelong he shared King's deep belief in the power of civil disobedience and non-violent protest to effect change. Over the years, Lewis was arrested at least 45 times. Looking

back, he said that before his first arrest, he didn't have complete confidence he had what it took to follow the path of non-violence. But he acted anyway. Confidence didn't fuel his action; confidence flowed from it afterwards. Congressman Lewis wrote a piece before his death that he asked to be published posthumously. It was published on the day of his funeral, Thursday. In it he wrote of the teaching of his mentor, Martin Luther King, Jr.:

He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up, and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.¹

We could add, "The kingdom of heaven is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build... the Beloved Community, a... [universe] at peace with itself."

Even if we're truly doubtful that we have **enough of anything of value** to give, let's belly up to the bar anyway and offer what we have, silencing our skepticism with the memory of our Lord's words, "*...you give them something to eat.*" There's a Central American song in our Evangelical Lutheran Worship book that sums this up. It's called "The Lord Now Sends Us Forth":

The Lord now sends us forth with hands to serve and give,
To make of all the earth a better place to live.
The angels are not sent into our world of pain
To do what we were meant to do in Jesus' name;
That falls to you and me and all who are made free.
Help us, O Lord, we pray, to do your will today.

Let us trust that God will always bless and amazingly multiply what we bring. Amen

¹John Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation," *NY Times*, July 30, 2020, A23.

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