

July 25, 2021
Lectionary 17, Year B
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
John 6:1-21
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

What does this mean?

The first part of our gospel reading for today is the gospel of John's take on the feeding of the five thousand miracle story. The Feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four gospels, which tells us that it's a pretty important story.

In the lectionary cycle, we are in Year B, which means that most of our gospel readings from last Advent through the end of the church year, at the end of November, have been from and will be from the gospel of Mark. Of course, the gospel of Mark includes the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. As I just said, this story is included in all four gospels.

But for some reason, the people who put the lectionary readings together decided to include the version this miracle from the gospel of John in Year B, instead of the version of the story from the gospel of Mark.

The bones of the story are the same in all four gospels, but they all also include some small details that are their own, and, as is usual for the gospel of John, John's version of the story makes the most departures from the versions that we find in the other gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

One of those differences is the boy who shares his food. The other gospels do not specify where the disciples get the five loaves and two fish that Jesus uses to feed the crowd, but in the gospel of John, they get it from a boy who apparently is willing to give up his supplies for Jesus' use. Jesus takes the boy's food and gives thanks for it and then starts handing it out to the crowd. Ultimately, everyone is fed, everyone has enough to be full. The text says that they have enough to eat, "as much as they wanted" (John 6:11) and then there are twelve basketfuls left over. It's a pretty familiar story.

But the detail of the little boy giving up the food that he had with him for Jesus to use, has led to this story been interpreted in a way that surprised me the first time I ever heard it,

about twelve years ago, and continues to surprise me to this day, including when I read it during my devotion time this past week.

The interpretation that has surprised me and continues to surprise me is an interpretation that says that this miracle, which is sometimes called the Feeding of the 5000 and sometimes called the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes isn't actually a miracle of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes to feed the crowd.

This interpretation says that this miracle is a miracle about the little boy's generosity of sharing the food that he brought with him and Jesus' presence inspiring people to share what they have with each other.

According to this interpretation, the people in the crowd actually have food with them, they're just keeping it under wraps, because they don't want to be put in the position of sharing their food with the strangers around them.

But then, when they see the little boy sharing his food and hear Jesus' confidence that so little can feed so many, they start bringing their food out from wherever they have hidden it, from under their robes or out of baskets or bags, and sharing with their neighbors, and ultimately it is discovered that in resources of the crowd, there is enough to feed everyone, with twelve basketfuls left over.

Now, there are probably some of you out there thinking, "Wow, that's a really cool idea! I love that interpretation of this story!"

And there are probably some of you thinking, "I can't believe that I'm listening to such heresy!" and considering not listening to the rest of this sermon to keep your theology pure.

To all of you, I would humbly request that you keep listening.

You see, I can understand the appeal of this interpretation, the idea that Jesus can turn our scarcity and fear to generosity and abundance. In fact, there are times when I see the generosity of people and I experience it as a miracle.

I see it every year as I watch quilts fill our sanctuary, even this year, during a year of pandemic, the pews were still overflowing with quilts, that came from people sharing abundantly, of their time, of the space in their home, of their creativity and talent, and then

hours and hours of their work at the sewing machine or leaning over tables in Kask Hall, pinning and tying to put the quilts together.

I saw the miracle of generosity and abundance at work last year, when after a year of financial upheaval, with work uncertainty for many, and with the fear and unknown of the pandemic for all of us, we ended the year here at Emmanuel with a financial surplus, having been able to pay our staff and meet our financial obligations throughout the year.

Most recently, I saw it last Friday when I had a to-do list three pages long that we needed to get through in order to get our building ready for our big reopening. I knew that there were four people coming to help at nine, so I knew that we would get some of the list done, but I really doubted that we would be able to get everything on the list finished. But, as the day progressed, people showed up and it was just enough for us to get everything on our list accomplished. We were supposed to end our work at 6:00 p.m., but by 5:30, the list was completed.

People showed up and worked hard, everyone tackling some part of the job and by working together we got the job done. It felt like a miracle. People giving what they had, the time, the energy, the patience to labor for a few hours in a hot church, to make it beautiful and clean and welcoming for those who have returned to it this morning.

There is something very compelling about the idea of our work together, our willingness to share, being itself a sign of God's presence among us, of the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us, of our work together being more than just the sum of its parts, of it adding up to be greater than we could have ever anticipated, leaving us with basketfuls left over, to use the language of the gospel reading.

I do in fact believe that the Holy Spirit does work in us and through us and does move us to generosity.

Another reason that interpreting this feeding miracle as truly being a miracle of inspiring generosity can be a temptation for preachers is that it could inspire, or compel, or persuade listeners to generosity.

The crowd is not passive in this interpretation. They are equipped with what they need and Jesus is the catalyst to get them to share it. In this interpretation, the message of this story

becomes, “Is God working in you? Then open your hearts, open your baskets, give what you have. Let God transform you into a person who shares what you have. Let God work a miracle through you for your neighbors, for your church community, for the world.”

Looked at this way, this interpretation invites us to be a part of God’s miracle. And who doesn’t want that? To live in our own lives, the motto of the ELCA, “God’s work, our hands!” To see ourselves as the tools of God’s work in the world.

But, as appealing as this interpretation could be, there are a couple of problem with it, and they’re pretty significant, because they can be summed up in this sentence, “That’s not what the story says.”

The first problem is that if you read this story carefully, as it appears in the gospel of John, Jesus himself gives the food to the people who are gathered. The text says, “Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted” (John 6:11).

The implication is that Jesus’ somehow gives the food personally to the 5,000 people, who are seated on the mountainside.

So, it’s not possible that this miracle is one of people sharing with their neighbors. Not if they received the miraculous food from Jesus’ own hand.

The second problem is that interpreting this story as a story in which Jesus’ inspires people to share, is that that is not at all how John describes the reaction of the people who witnessed the miracle, who were a part of the miracle, who ate of the loaves and the fish.

This is what John says that people who experienced the miracle said about it, “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’” (John 6:14).

What they didn’t say was “Isn’t it amazing how Jesus got us all to share what we had with each other? I was planning on hiding my lunch from the rest of you and saving it for myself.”

What they didn’t say was, “I didn’t know how much I had to give until I listened to Jesus and saw his faith.”

Instead, they saw what Jesus did, they tasted the food of his providing, and they knew that they were receiving something holy, in the presence of someone holy. They knew that they were in the presence of God's glory which had come into the world.

Another interesting thing about this gospel reading, which always, when it appears in the lectionary, comes to us as 21 verses and includes verses 15-21, is that I have never, ever preached nor heard anyone else preach on the final verses of the reading, verses 15-21, the part where Jesus walks on the water.

It's like the miracle that might seem to us to be more useful, the miracle of feeding hungry people always sucks up all of the air, all of the time in a sermon, compared with this seeming afterthought in the lectionary reading, of Jesus walking to his frightened disciples in the storm and speaking these words, "It is I; do not be afraid."

But I think that this story will help us understand the story of the feeding of the 5,000 better.

You see, I do not argue with the idea that the encounters that we have with Jesus throughout our lives, in baptismal waters, in holy scripture, at the communion table, in the fellowship that we share with our community in Christ, in Confirmation vows that we make, in the laying on of hands, in times of joy and wonder and times of sorrow and grief, in the still small voice that speaks us in prayer, transform us and shape us. They should and they do.

Because of those encounters with Jesus, we should be people who are generous, who are simple in our wants and needs, and extravagant in our giving, never hiding what we have away from those in need around us.

Encounters with Jesus should transform us to live from a place of abundance, that we see modeled in his life and that reflects the hope we have in his resurrection.

Without question, the deep hungers of the world, the actual physical hunger of people all over the world, the hunger for justice of those who are oppressed, the deep hunger of the earth itself, that groans for healing as the flood waters rise and the fires rage, all of those hungers and more, require the response of a people who have been transformed and inspired by God's generosity to be generous.

We do need to learn the lesson of abundant self-giving and we can learn that lesson from Jesus. We just don't learn it here, in this reading in the way that people sometimes imagine.

What we learn here, though, is that we actually do need more than an attitude adjustment or a better philosophy. What we see here is we need a savior.

And that is what we find in these stories. Not just an example to follow, not just words to live by, but the giver life himself. Jesus Christ, who feeds us with his own hands. Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the storms of our lives, who stays with us, and who tells us, "Do not be afraid."

Jesus Christ, who is an example for us, who is our teacher, but who more than anything else, is our savior, who comes to show us and take us to the glory of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.