

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 13]

Sunday, July 31, 2005

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalms 145:8-9, 15-22

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

ONLY FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISH?

Three mice died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked how things were going. The mice said that things were going OK, but since they had such short legs, it was hard for them to get around because heaven was so big. St. Peter told them that he could help. A few days later, an angel came by and gave each of the mice a set of roller skates. The mice put on the roller skates and sure enough, they were able to zip around heaven going anywhere they wanted. A little while later, a certain cat died and went to heaven. After a couple days, St. Peter stopped by and asked how things were going. The cat answered by saying, "I really like it here. I am having a great time and enjoying myself. But, most of all, I love the meals on wheels." How many of you saw that one coming?

Today we hear Matthew's story about Jesus multiplying the loaves and the fishes and feeding well over 5,000 people. Can you imagine the disciples on inline skates whipping around folks as they dispense the meal? The main point is not the sight of the disciples serving the crowds. The main point is that Jesus shows mercy, has compassion on the crowd. Jesus calls us to act as he did, with compassion.

Imagine you are a missionary sent to a refugee camp on the Sudan/Kenya border. Your bible study group is made up of people who have fled the genocide war in Sudan barely subsisting on the UN rations. After reading this bible passage, an angry young man stands up and screams at you that God no longer does such miracles, so he is going to join the rebels and fight back. That is the only way to get anything done as far as he is concerned.

Imagine another difficult task. You are sharing this story with a congregation that is well fed, maybe even a bit over-fed. Their main experience with food is to remember what food they need to keep watching and avoiding keeping on their diets and with their health care plans. They are good people who will donate canned goods monthly for the local food bank and will donate to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal when it is lifted up in a congregational emphasis. Church charities more than double feeding 5,000 people every day. That would be a productive sermon if people were moved to do something to feed those who are hungry today and tomorrow, rather than just talk about it. We will hear more about this as we lift up World Hunger needs with a special emphasis on a Sunday in October.

However, is there something more happening in this miracle story? Is there something this story says to us in addition to "Do something" concrete to show compassion for people who are hungry? When people talk about the feeding of the five thousand they usually talk about the miracle, which means the multiplication of the loaves and the fish. This part of the story is impressive. Not only did God's power produce enough food to feed five thousand people-not counting the women and children but also there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Twelve baskets, like the twelve tribes of Israel-that means enough to fill the doggie bags of all of God's people. This is truly an impressive miracle. However, think about this. In Jesus' culture people took seriously the old maxim that "you are what you eat" not from a nutritional standpoint but from a concern for kosher purity. Most of us do not think in these ways today, but many people who joined Jesus that day in the wilderness did. The thought is that if you want to be the right kind of person, right even with God, you must eat the right kind of food. It sounds easy to do if that is important to you, but it is not. There is only two ways to be sure that what you are eating is kosher. One is to be in the kitchen, not only hovering over everything on the ingredient list, but making sure before hand that that no surface has been contaminated. The other way is to eat only with folks who understand how important it is to eat right, people you can trust to prepare a meal that you can safely eat. .

Now think of this in respect to this miracle story. Nobody knew where this food came from. Imagine those five thousand people at Jesus' spontaneous luncheon party whispering to each other: "Does anyone know who baked this bread?" "What kind of fish was this?" That did not happen. Five thousand people and more took Jesus' word and literally, only God knows where the food came from. This food is a miracle from God. As we hear this story, we see that Jesus was not just some "guy" and that breaking bread with folks at some midmorning snack. Jesus is someone who literally changes lives. Five thousand people-not counting women and children-found their lives transformed in encountering Jesus. All of their fears of dangers to be avoided (food purity laws of that cultural time) gave way to enthusiasm for sharing the feast before them. This is food blessed and given from God. Think of the kind of trust Jesus must have lifted up in people to get the response of eating without worrying what or where the food came from. This is real life-changing power. This power is ours as well as we gather to hear this Word of God, worship, and share in the meal of forgiveness and mercy as we gather before the altar.

However, that is not the end of it. There is one more miracle in this story and it might be the most impressive of all. First, there was the multiplication of the loaves and the fish. The second was the miraculous trust Jesus inspired in those who came to him and made them forget about whether the food was safe or kosher. The third miracle can be explained this way: In Jesus' culture it was not just "You are what you eat"; it was also, "You are what you eat with." Imagine the scene at this spontaneous feeding of 5000 and imagine that you have just experienced the second miracle of being able to trust Jesus to provide you with food that is good. However, Jesus is not the peanut vendor at the Dragon's game; he does not hurl individual meals with miraculous accuracy directly to you sitting in the crowd. Strangers were involved in handling the bread that Jesus broke, blessed, and gave to the disciples. Take that bread and you are taking into yourself not just, whatever was in the field where the wheat was grown and in the kitchen when it was baked, but also what was on the hands of every person in that

crowd. That is reason enough to be skittish about this meal. However, what happened? Along this hillside, five thousand people were willing to receive not only Jesus and the bread that he blessed but also the strangers with whom they shared it. Every one of them became one with every other. This was a completely spontaneous dinner, so there was no checking the quest list or asking for credentials. All distinctions between Jews and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, just did not count anymore. This third miracle reminds us that we have been called to Jesus' table to trust Jesus and accept all the gifts offered and blessed by Jesus, the bread the wine that not only forgives us as individuals but also binds us together as people with a mission.

We are called to trust that God's power has blessed us with the gifts we need to build us this community of faith, but with the power to see that, all God's children are fed with what they need from God. When we come to the worship, we receive the strength and courage we need to be bread for the world, the Body of Christ for the world. One sermon cannot lay that all out for us but in our breaking of bread at Jesus' table, we are made one with each other and called out not only for the hungry thousands counted but for also those not counted who are precious in God's sight.

May the Spirit of the living God make this miracle happen repeatedly among us and for us now.

In Jesus', name Amen.
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