

Pentecost, Proper 12, July 29, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. 2 Kings 4:42-44, Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

“Father, I cannot tell a lie. I cut down that cherry tree!” That’s attributed to? George Washington! Why do we remember it? Because it’s one of the defining stories about Washington. It reflects who Washington was – a person of complete honesty and integrity. All sides in the pre-independence colonies knew that. To a person, the leaders of the nascent nation were confident that Washington would never base decisions on his own aggrandizement; they knew he could be trusted with the welfare of the nation. And so it proved, through the hard years of war, the struggles of the Continental Congress, the Declaration of Independence, and the birth of the nation.

Where do we get the cherry tree story from? When Washington died, on December 14, 1799, up stepped an itinerant minister and bookseller named Mason Locke Weems, who wrote one of the first biographies of Washington. He told his publisher in 1800 that his plan was “to show that [Washington’s] unparalleled rise and elevation were due to his great virtues.” His book did just that.

And yet, scholars say, Washington never said “Father, I cannot tell a lie. I cut down that cherry tree!” Does that make the story untrue? Well, in the literal sense – that, indeed, Washington did not, at the age of 6, cut down a cherry tree – yes. But in the larger sense, as a story reflective of who George Washington was as a human being, it perfectly encapsulates the man who many call the Father of the Nation, and who certainly defined the role of President of the United States.

Truth in the literal sense is irrelevant to this sort of story, because the story’s trying to do something so much bigger and more universal than simply describing a specific event at a specific moment in a specific place. Or, to put it the other way around, if this Cherry Tree Story really was only about a moment in 1738 when a six-year-old boy cut down a tree and then admitted what he’d done, why would we still be telling the story? It’s only relevant because it conveys to us a bigger truth, or truths, about – in this case – a particular individual we revere, it confirms for us what the much larger story has told us about him: that he was a person of absolute honesty and integrity.

In the same way, neither of the Kings or John readings are concerned with truth in the literal sense. To ask, “Did Jesus really feed thousands of people with five loaves and two fish?” is to ask the wrong question – and if you ask the wrong question then you’ll miss the point core point of the story. As with the Cherry Tree Incident, the actuality, the literalness, of how small amounts of food could possibly feed thousands of people is irrelevant to this sort of story, because the story’s trying to do something so much bigger and more universal than simply describing a specific event at a specific moment in a specific place.

So, Was there literal “manna from heaven?” 20 loaves of barley? 5 barley loaves and 2 fish? It’s the wrong question to ask! Just another rabbit hole that distracts. **Instead, ask “what are these stories saying?”**

The reading from Kings is an echo of the stories of the Passover and of the Manna in the Wilderness, and both those stories – and the figures at their center, Moses and Elisha– are doing the same thing as the story of Jesus and the feeding that we meet in John’s gospel – All three proclaim a message of God’s abundance and God’s power to save. Jesus, John says, is a mighty prophet who stands in the line of continuity with Moses and Elisha. And, further, John says, the “life” that Jesus brings and offers is shaped by the core of the Exodus and Elisha stories.

- Just as God brought Israel out of slavery into freedom, so, now, Jesus also offers a similar gift from all the different sorts of slavery that bind us.
- Just as God provided abundantly for Israel in a time of dire circumstances with manna in the wilderness, so Jesus brings a similar kind of life in the midst of human need.
- Just as Elisha was known for his many miracles of provision, so Jesus provides divine food.

Spiritual food; divine sustenance; transforming grace. That’s what we’re doing right now, isn’t it?!

I think, in this context, you can see how Jesus intentionally linked the bread of the Last Supper with divine gifts from God that his scriptures talked about in the gifts of Passover, and manna and barley bread. He knew what was about to happen, and for the love he had for them all, he so very much he wanted to offer that sustenance to them.

For the love of them. For the love of us – all of us – God offers us these same gifts through our relationship with Jesus’ life-giving power, which – in worship – we find here in bread and wine.

How is Jesus present here? Christians have asked that question since close to the beginning of our faith; we’ve even fought wars over it: is Jesus literally present? Is this really flesh and blood we share, or is it, rather, a spiritual presence?

Rather like asking if the Cherry Tree Incident, or the Feeding of the 5,000, actually literally happened, questions about literal, or real, or spiritual presence, are, in the end, distractions – the wrong question to ask.

Instead, ask how does sharing in this common meal open us to the transforming power of God’s grace? In what ways are we open to surrendering the self-imposed slaveries of our 21st Century world that are holding us prisoner? How are we fed with the bread from heaven? How does sharing in this common meal make us one community, in Christ?

Ask these questions, and you’re on the right path!