

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
2 Kings 4: 42-44, Psalm 145: 10-19, Ephesians 3: 14-21

Each of the four Gospels asks a question about Jesus. The writers then structure their gospel to answer the basic core question. We have in the past several weeks been reading the Gospel of Mark. The question that Mark attempt to answer is What did Jesus do?

This makes sense, Mark is the earliest Gospel we have and so to focus on what happened, what Jesus did seems proper. Today is a departure. Our Gospel is from John, the latest in time of the four Gospels. John's question is who was Jesus?. That too makes sense. Mark, Matthew, and Luke, answer the questions of what Jesus did, what Jesus said and what Jesus felt, These three together with John are brought together to form a picture of Jesus first for the disciples and later for the Church. Taken together the four Gospels provides us with a portrait of Jesus in our own day.

John provides us with two "action" stories, stories of things that Jesus did which tell us something about who he was and is. Both of these stories are miracles in the best sense of the word. They are miraculous not so much because of their outcome but because of the way they were resolved. They are resolved through the faith that Jesus had in God and the power of God.

A friend, more scholarly than I, recently explained the meaning of the word miracle by going back to the Latin root. The meaning coming forward from Latin was of something that was wonderous a person, an event, or a sign. Miracles are astonishing. According to the Latin root they are things that literally made one smile. Certainly, being fed or brought safely out of a storm would at times seem both astonishing and would be cause for a smile. Think for a moment, using this definition, what are the miraculous or astonishing things in your life? What makes you smile?

John tells us that a large crowd kept following Jesus, following because they saw that he could heal the sick, could work a miracle even in seemingly hopeless cases. Healing was a sign that Jesus was more than a prophet, more than a wise man, more than a physician. And so, the crowds followed wanting to experience a miracle in their lives.

True miracles are not magic tricks designed to entice people into faith. True miracles strengthen the faith that is already present. The abundance of food that fed 5,000 from a few loaves and fish to the one who did not have faith would seem like magic. At least for some in the crowd, and for the disciples these actions of Jesus, these events were true miracles. They were the beginning of faith for them. This seed of faith planted in each had its larger foundation in the faith that Jesus had in God.

Faith rarely happens all at once. It is planted, nurtured, grows, and finally matures. Once firmly rooted faith generates the seeds of faith in others. That is what was happening if we look closely at the story of the feeding of the multitude. The story of this miracle appears in all four gospels. It is the only story of ministry that is found in each of the four. The only other accounts that stretch across all four gospels are the events of Holy Week and Easter.

The feeding of the multitude is a foundational story, one that tells us what Jesus saw as the reason he was sent from God. That reason was to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. That phrase, kingdom of heaven on earth doesn't bring forth a clear picture in most of our

minds. We are too far removed from kingdoms and even from a literal understanding of heaven. Instead think of Jesus ministry as coming to form a community of human beings who lived as God had created them to live.

Imagine for a moment that you were one of the crowds, gathered on the hilltop. It is growing late, and this is an isolated part of the country. You have been listening to Jesus for hours, perhaps without food or drink. The disciples are worried, and rightly so. The people if they leave this place without sustenance might very well faint with hunger and die of exposure. What to do? This is the question that the disciples ask. Jesus knew what he would do. Jesus action establishes a pattern, a map if you will, for the disciples but also down through the centuries for the Church and for us.

Jesus takes what is available, the abundance that is there, 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, gives thanks, and begins to distribute the food. Now on the surface this is laughable, 5 barley loaves, (about this size) and 2 fish (not huge, just small brook trout). Not only laughable but the action that could incite a food riot. But it didn't. All were fed with much left over.

It's important in understanding what this says to us today, not to get bogged down in "how" this happened, but to remember the core actions. Taking what is available, giving thanks and sharing with all in need. The miracle is in seeing the abundance all around us. Abundance that is defined as "just enough". That is God's abundance, always just enough.

Currently the politically correct phrase for hunger is "food insecurity". It makes it the issue seem a bit more distant for us. Most of us have felt hunger, not necessarily the hunger of too many missed meals, rather the hunger that signals that it is time to eat for our health's sake. Most of us have not felt "food insecurity" wondering where our next meal and the meal after that may come from. There are those who live with this food insecurity for weeks and months at a time.

How can we each help? Help in real, concrete ways? Jesus tells us how in the story of the miraculous feeding of 5,000. He asked the crowd to sit down, he recognized their existence and their need. He then collected what was available, and he knew that it was an abundance of just enough to feed these people. He gave thanks, recognizing that all we have comes from God and that stretching back to the beginning of time, God has provided abundance. It is how we use that abundance that has made some with too much and some with too little. After having given thanks, Jesus distributed the food to the crowd. Notice how he did this.

"...he distributed them to those who were seated; so also, the fish, as much as they wanted." As much as they wanted. The key is that those who were served wanted only enough to satisfy their hunger in the moment. They experienced the abundance of just enough.

In our community we have an organization dedicated to making sure that people who are hungry have food to eat. The organization is Good Cheer, and their goal is to eliminate hunger on South Whidbey. They cannot do it alone. In the spirit of the feeding of the multitude, they do not give those coming a pre-selected bag of food. Rather they allow those coming to "shop" for what they need. The shelves are filled with all kinds of food. But there will only be an abundance for those who come if we help. If we each use the model Jesus has set forth for us. Recognize and remember that there are people just like us, our sisters and brothers who are hungry. Acknowledge the truth of this in a place surrounded by food. Then

be prepared to participate in a miracle. Take some of what you have or can buy, give thanks for your own abundance, and then distribute the food you have to share through contributions to Good Cheer. As a spiritual good deed, you might each time you shop for groceries, shop for food to share as well.

We have a little red wagon to collect the food for humans and to collect food for dogs and cats. We will be sure that it is delivered each week to Good Cheer. Alternatively, you can take the food directly to them. In either case, you are sharing the abundance that you have with others. In doing so you are living the gospel, the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Together we can feed the multitude.