

Proper 13A

Matthew 14.13-21
Feeding the 5000
St. Augustine's, 8.3.14

Blessed be the Name of God

This morning, we are given a fine and altogether familiar gospel story, a very happy circumstance for the preacher. The preacher is one who, like Jesus, often undertakes to withdraw from the crowd and one who also, like Jesus, finds food full of possibilities.

This morning's story comes right after Matthew's account of the beheading of John the Baptist, something profoundly disturbing to Jesus. It's little wonder that Matthew begins our story by telling us that when Jesus heard this news, he had to get off by himself. Makes perfect sense to me!

But by this point in Jesus' life, getting off by himself was increasingly difficult, almost impossible. Likely all too quickly as far as he was concerned, Jesus was joined by his closest followers and by a great crowd of people from the nearby towns. Instead of reacting to this the way I might have, Matthew tells us that Jesus "had compassion for them and cured their sick." So the day passed in this way, compassion and healing.

It is here that the disciples enter more clearly into our story. Concerned with the onset of evening and the prospect of hunger, they

suggest to Jesus that he send the crowd away, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” This too makes perfect sense, just the way we disciples typically think. But, as usual, Jesus has another notion. He replied, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” Confounded, the disciples responded, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” [Unrecorded in the narrative but doubtless true, the disciples muttered amongst themselves, bewildered by Jesus’ preposterous suggestion.]

By some means, Jesus fed them all, “about five thousand men, besides women and children.” By some means, he fed them all and there still remained twelve baskets full left over. Other people have and will theorize on how this happened and I’m delighted to leave all that to them. I’m satisfied that that great crowd was satisfied, and that Jesus pulled it off.

Of more interest for us this morning is the language Matthew uses to describe the actions of Jesus. I want you to fasten on this language, particularly the verbs, and having fastened on them, these verbs, to consider them beyond the limits of this particular story.

After asking that the bread and fish be brought to him and getting the crowd to sit down, wherever they could, Jesus began to handle the provisions. “Taking the five loaves and the two fish,” Matthew tells us, “he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave

them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowd.” “Taking the five loaves and two fish, he...blessed and broke the loaves and gave them...” Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave. That’s how he managed the provisions, the bread and fish. Took, blessed, broke and gave. Those are the verbs to fasten onto.

Very soon, in this very room, other provisions will be brought to the table here and in the midst of us, the Presider will lead us in the Great Prayer of Blessing, the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharistic Prayer. The prayer we will pray, in structure and substance, is very like the prayers the Church has prayed over bread and wine from very nearly the beginning. Contained in this prayer is a story, a story even more familiar to us than the story of the miraculous feeding of the crowd. Even more familiar.

This more familiar story, embedded in the Great Thanksgiving, is one you and I recognize quite readily. In outline, the story says, “On the night before he was betrayed, Jesus took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them...” The narrative that we know, the narrative that we will hear again this morning as we have heard it for countless years, this narrative appears in one form or another in three of the gospels and in Paul’s First Letter to the Church in Corinth. In its liturgical form, this story has been in our prayers nearly forever. Took, blessed, broke and gave. The verbs we have fastened onto.

Whatever the fine details of the events with the crowd, the way Matthew tells us about them is clearly informed by his experience in the liturgy. That is, the liturgy as Matthew knew it predates the gospel record. What Matthew sees Jesus doing and what Matthew records Jesus doing is what Jesus did in the upper room, with these same disciples, just before his death. He took, blessed, broke and gave, in the upper room and in the midst of the crowd. And they were satisfied. His table companions in that hidden room and that great crowd on the hillside. They were all satisfied.

What I'm suggesting to you is that Matthew saw the actions of Jesus through his own Eucharistic experience. Matthew's narrative is reported the way it is because he saw through Eucharistic eyes, with a Eucharistic heart and mind. I want you all to be of that heart and mind.

The key word here is "see." There is, firstly, the physical act of seeing and then there is "getting it." Yes, I saw what happened with my eyes, and in that instance, I got it. "Oh, yes, I see," we might say. "I get it!" You know what I mean? You get it?

Mindful of the actions of Jesus at the table, taking, blessing, breaking and giving, Matthew saw Jesus rehearsing these same actions not with bread and wine but with loaves and fish. Jesus collected the provisions, offered thanks for them as a way of blessing, broke them for distribution and then he gave away all the fragments. Matthew got it!

Now, I want to help you see, perhaps afresh, what you have seen many, many times before. So, pay attention!

Very soon, provisions will be brought to the Table. Having been taken and placed there in an orderly sort of fashion, we will give thanks to God as a way of blessing the bread and wine. Once blessed, the presiding minister will break the bread so that it can be shared and with the aid of others, these holy things, these provisions, will be given away. If we have eyes to see, we will see in what we do here, what Matthew saw Jesus doing, taking, blessing, breaking and giving. I'm eager for you to see this in the self same way as Matthew would have. I want you to get it!

But there is more.

There is a way that many of Jesus' sayings are presented in the gospels. Often, at the beginning of parables in particular, the text will read, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." "The Kingdom of God is like..." By this means, we know that we are about to be told something of how God wants it to be, how things will be when God is all in all. At the resolution of all things, this is how it will be. So we hear and so we are taught. The Kingdom of God is like this.

We might well expect this same way of beginning for our story this morning, the Feeding of the Five Thousand. What we see here, acted out so clearly and so powerfully is what God intends. Our story is about the Reign of God, what the Reign of God looks like, what we are to strive for in our time and place.

On that hillside, see what happened. Everyone was invited to receive something. Everyone was given what there was, everyone and in equal portion. Everyone satisfied. No one left out. Everyone included. Everyone blessed in receiving.

In a very few minutes, you and I will witness this same reality, acted out in this room we hold in common. After we have taken the provisions, blessed them by the actions of the Holy Spirit in prayer and broken them so they can be given away, everyone will be invited to come to the Table. Everyone who comes will receive what there is, bread and wine. Everyone will receive in equal portion, equal measure. Everyone is invited. No one goes away hungry or thirsty. It happened in that Upper Room. It happened on that hillside with the multitude. I will happen here, as it does every Sunday, twice!

So I want you to see this taking, blessing, breaking and giving for what it is. Jesus in the Upper Room; Jesus feeding the many; us doing in the Church's Eucharist exactly what Jesus did. Taking, blessing, breaking and giving to everyone who comes.

One last thing. Nearly forty years ago, I read a book the title of which comes to mind every time I receive communion, here or anywhere else. In 1976, the Roman Catholic theologian Monica Hellwig published *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*. It's a compelling title and it needs to compel us all. This ritualized meal that we will share must call to our conscious mind not only the gracious actions of Jesus and the

Church, it must also call to our minds and hearts the hunger of the world. There are too many who do not eat so well as we do and they require our prayer, our action. They are companions of God, as we are. I ask you to be mindful of them.

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