

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 6, 2017

**"SERVING ALL GOD'S PEOPLE"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 9:1-5 ~ Matthew 14:13-21

This morning I'm going to resist the pedestrian temptation to call Jesus' feeding of the five thousand a miracle. It's not that I don't understand the appeal of describing this event as a miracle ... and what Jesus does is rather wondrous. It certainly made an impression because it's one of the few stories found in all four gospels. And look, here we are, still talking about it over two thousand years later. But I nevertheless worry that by drawing attention to Jesus' act of feeding these crowds we may actually *overlook* the more significant miracles that take place in the story Matthew that narrates.

Here's the thing ... while we may debate whether Jesus suspended the natural order to feed the five thousand ... or whether his example merely prompted the crowd to share what it already had ... these just *weren't* the concerns of the earliest Christians. Keep in mind that Matthew told us in the first chapter of his gospel that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us" ... and for the one who made the world out of nothing and created light from darkness ... multiplying some food and loaves was no major feat. Moreover, Jesus wasn't the only one living in the first century that people claimed was working wonders. Nor was he the only one people hailed as a messiah. He wasn't even the only one to claim to be the son of God. Goodness gracious, most of the Caesars did that! Neither Jesus nor his early followers imagined that stories about wondrous acts would convince people of Jesus' divine origins. That was never the point ... the miracles that Jesus performed were always *signs* of the character of the God ... whose presence Jesus bears.

Which is what brings us to the first of two miracles described in this story that are anything but pedestrian ... the point isn't *what* Jesus does, but *why*. Because the character of the God that Jesus reveals and represents is captured in a single word, "compassion." Matthew says that when Jesus saw the great crowd that had followed him he had *compassion* on them. And so, he healed their sick ... tended their needs ... and shared with them his presence. And then ... when evening came and they found themselves without food ... he fed them.

Let's take a look at the context of this scene. It begins with the transitional line, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." The thing that Jesus just heard about was John the Baptist's murder by King Herod at a feast. The juxtaposition couldn't be more ironic ... or powerful. One moment Matthew invites us to focus on one more episode from the "lifestyles of the rich and shameless" ... and in the next he fastens our attention on a scene portraying poor, sick, and hungry crowds looking for relief. It's like switching channels from the Kardashians to a news report on Syrian refugees. Matthew is indicating by these contrasting scenes just what *kind* of God Jesus represents.

In the first century, you see, gods aren't normally supposed to care about people like the crowds. The gods of the ancient philosophers, for instance, were considered dispassionate and so were regularly referred to by cozy names like "the Unmoved Mover" or "First Cause." At the other end of the spectrum, the gods of the Greek and Roman empires were notorious for using humans as playthings and for ordering the world to their whims. At best, gods were supposed to take the side of the rich and powerful ... to stand with people like Herod and his well-fed party guests ... sanctioning their exploitation of the poor and even the bloody murder of a truth-teller like John. They were definitely *not* known for siding with the oppressed, the ordinary, the downtrodden, or the hungry.

And yet that's what happens here, as Jesus renews, embodies, and fulfills the consistent call of the God of Israel to feed the hungry ... as if to say "You can kill John. You can kill me, or try. But I will rise, and others will rise to continue the work, because my compassion is boundless.

Make no mistake, feeding the hungry was no minor endeavor ... as what we now call "food scarcity" wasn't only *known* in the ancient world ... it was *rampant*. And so, the disciples' suggestion that these hordes of people go buy food isn't just unrealistic ... they are, after all, out in a deserted place ... it's ridiculous ... and even a little insulting ... as the folks making up these desperate crowds probably didn't have money to buy food in the first place. So, Jesus tells his disciples to get over their callous self-concern and feed them themselves.

Which brings us to the second miracle of the story ... Jesus uses the *disciples* ... even when they would rather look after themselves ... to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper ... Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity ... "we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes" ... to one of abundance ... "thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes." Whatever their initial skepticism ... or doubt ... or self-preoccupation ... the disciples are caught up in Jesus words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy that "all ate and were filled." Yes, God used even these reluctant disciples to care for the poor and hungry that God loves so much.

And that miracle continues. When a college-grad eschews a high-paying job in order to teach disadvantaged kids, God's miracles continue. When a parent puts dreams of advancement in their career to the side to care for a special-needs child, God is working that same kind of miracle. When one student stands up against bullies in defense of another student, the God of compassion is again miraculously revealed. When a fledgling community of faith makes a promise that no one that comes to its doors will be turned away, God is still at work performing miracles through disciples eager, reluctant, and everything in between ... miracles that easily rival those reported in today's reading.

Because the real wonder of this story is that it continues ... God still cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable ... the poor, the immigrant, the hungry ... and God continues to use *us* to care for them.

My graduation ceremony from seminary was wonderful. We processed down the streets of Hyde Park in Chicago to the sounds of the Dixie Land band that proceeded us. Entering the sanctuary

of a very large church we waded to our family, friends and faculty and found our seats. The speakers were inspiring ... the music was stellar ... and each of us proudly received our diplomas. At the end of the ceremony one of the deans gave the "charge." A "charge" is an order ... a command, and hopefully, a command from Christ. I was privileged then to have been chosen to deliver our response to that "charge." But today I am privileged to deliver the "charge" itself.

My charge is this two-fold command from Christ himself. Think of them as Jesus' marching orders. First: "You feed them." Serve Christ. Serve this church. Serve the people. Serve all people. I mean, feed their hunger. Let no job be too small. Let no task be beneath your dignity in caring for all God's children. Notice their needs and as you are able ... help us to meet them. I mean the crowd of strangers God sends to us. I also mean our own co-disciples in Christ. "You feed them!" Lead us by serving us. Lead us by serving others. Keep the peace by seeing that no one is neglected. I read a quote this week that says it all, "God did not bless you to sit around on your 'blessed assurance.'" Make this place God's place for all people. And show us what it means to be Jesus' disciples in the world. Today, when we celebrate communion together ... think of it as bread for the journey, and go and do likewise ... go forth and share God's love with all you meet ... especially with those in deepest need.

This is a tall task ... not one to take lightly. I would not ask you to do it if I had not already seen you doing it. Sometimes, like the prophet Isaiah, it means encouraging people to seek what they need, rather than what they want. Sometimes, like Paul, it means feeling anguish and sorrow in your heart for your own people who turn away from the grace that gives you life. Sometimes, like the disciples, it means being faced with an impossible task that God wants you to do.

And I need to tell you, it is impossible for us to do. We don't have the emotional or physical or material or spiritual resources ourselves to feed the five thousand strangers and friends that God will send our way. Because frankly, we aren't much. This isn't the church of the one percenters. Herod doesn't worship here and neither does Wall Street. But if we will put what we have in Jesus' hands, we will see that nothing is impossible for God.

Therefore, I charge you with Jesus' other order of the day. Jesus says: "Give what you have to me." Because he will take what you give him, as small as it may seem, and it will be enough.

Like you, I wake up a lot of mornings and say, "Lord, I'm not enough. I don't have enough to do what you have for me to do today." But I give it to Jesus anyway. But do you know what? It's enough. It turns out to be enough. Because Jesus will multiply what I give him to meet the needs he has given me to meet. That's a miracle to me ... that God can use my meager resources to help somebody else, maybe even quite a few somebody else's in the world. So I charge you ... place who you are ... and what you have ... in Jesus' hands, and when he gives it back to you, you feed them. You feed them.

In this story of the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew gives us a picture of what Protestants call "the priesthood of all believers." All of us disciples of Jesus are God's go-betweens ... giving to Christ what little we have to offer ... then passing into the hands of friends and

strangers what Christ has given us ... serving God and serving all God's people. Therefore, this is your calling ... if you are a follower of Jesus, the Christ.

What will happen if we do what Jesus' ordered us to do? What effect might that have on the world? They say the beating of a butterfly's wings can start a chain reaction that causes a hurricane halfway around the world. What could a handful of Christians ... being Christian ... with the love of Christ ... following Jesus' orders ... and serving all God's children do? Let's just see, shall we?!

May we pray?

Sovereign God, take who we are and what we have and use it for your purposes. Make of us your church. Let us all be your servants carrying Christ's name. And though it seems so little, make who we are and what we have enough for Jesus' sake. Amen.