

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
II SAMUEL 11:1-15
PSALM 14
EPHESIANS 3:14-21
JOHN 6:1-21
July 28, 2024

Regifting!

When last we left our gospel hero and his disciples, they had tried in vain to escape for a little while, searching for a place of retreat and solace, hoping to find a deserted, secluded, location allowing them to rest their weary bones, to be refreshed, renewed, restored, revived. They crossed the Sea of Galilee, known as the Sea of Tiberias by the Romans, a not-so-subtle reminder of the brutal regime that was firmly entrenched, intractably and immovably in charge of what had become a volatile region, still is! They sailed in search of a perfect getaway, a place that they assumed would offer the quiet solitude, the sabbath, they so desperately needed, surely able to outrun and outpace the crowds, to stealthily evade the needy multitudes. Ah, if only they could pause but for a brief moment of respite. Jesus had become quite popular with his preaching and teaching, and of course, he had already become a local legend because of all those purported healing miracles. Managing the masses had quickly become a major part of their everyday activities. The routine was grinding, seemingly nonstop, the needs far more numerous than any one human being could address, more illnesses than even one believed to be the Christ, thought to be the Messiah, could assuage. A road manager would have surely come in handy! It is amazing how you can be surrounded by people all the time and still feel so all alone, seem so isolated but never detached, so very much all by yourself, filled to the brim with those lonesome blues. My hunch is that this was the way it was with Jesus, the way that the rabbi often felt as he diligently sought to do the herculean improbability of doing God's bidding, as he strived to do the will of the One he called Abba, Father. The close communion Jesus transparently portrayed with his holy and heavenly parent indicating the closest relationship that a human being could have with the Divine, as if there was not even the slightest degree of separation between them. **The weight Jesus carried was heavy, much like the millstones he describes elsewhere in the Gospels, much like the cross he would one day be forced to carry up a hill called Golgotha, the responsibility taking an agonizing toll, the rabbi longing to please the God to whom he believed he was absolutely accountable. The pressure was palpable, unrelenting, as Jesus fought exhaustion, striving diligently to keep up the pace and meet the hopes and prayers of the steady stream of seekers holding their seemingly unlimited needs as they continually bombarded him from all sides, every angle imaginable.** All he and the disciples wanted was

just one day, one day away from the monotonous routine of an overwhelming tsunami of bandwagon groupies, the needs of whom bordered on demands.

Well, as luck would have it, the crowd followed him, mirroring his every turn, even beating him to his impromptu destination, a turn of events that really was no surprise in the least. The Gospel of Mark tells us that the crowd went ahead of him as if they knew his next, his every move, predicting precisely, exactly, where he was going. There was no getting away from them, no escape hatch to whisk him off, as if to teleport him and his to a place that was only a pipedream, a figment of his imagination. **Wherever he went, there they were! It was as if he was being stalked, hunted like prey! But here they were and here he was, and he knew in his heart of hearts exactly what had to be done, what he had to do. After all, Jesus would never turn a blind eye, would never turn his back. God forbid that Jesus would ever even think of abandoning the least of these his brethren and sistren in their hour of need. Time to get to work! Time to meet some needs. Time for Jesus to be Jesus. One more time, every time, all the time! You know, all it takes is to perform one perceived miracle and all bets are off! John does not tell us, but it is easy to presume that Jesus immediately denied self and got down to business as he began to fulfill the tasks at hand, to heal those who came looking for the salve that only Jesus could provide, the literal balm of Gilead incarnated in human form. We can only imagine the scene! Well, time was getting long in the day, and no one had eaten, a huge problem Jesus began to sense in his spirit or perhaps with his own growling stomach. As usual Jesus put the needs of everyone else above his own, only thinking of himself last if he ever gave a first, much less a second, thought about himself! He could see the restlessness in the masses, a strong indication, call it a sign, that they were all hungry, both literally and metaphorically, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. What to do, what to do!**

If when we read the six Gospel stories of the feeding of the multitudes, if we read them as factual history, as literal events taken at face value, then there is really nothing left to say about them other than they are great reads. There really are no lessons, no sermons, springing forth from them, nothing new under the sun to say about them. But if, however, we dare to read these texts that appear in some form in all four Gospels, as allegorical, as metaphorical, symbolic in so many rich ways, suddenly our minds are opened to a whole new world of possibilities, allowing a much deeper discovery and more satisfying exploration of meaning. These rich narratives provide the potential for interpretive discovery, a word, or words, that speak an eternal, a transcendent, word to the human recipient. The fact that the feeding stories are the only recorded miracle appearing in every Gospel, Matthew and Mark even telling a version of the tale not once but twice, is a clear indication of their importance and primacy in the Jesus narrative. And of course, reading them through the lens of myth and metaphor is how I interpret and understand them, the way I choose to read these stories, and thus, of course, the way I, therefore, preach them. According to *Salt*, a lectionary commentary,

“John,” I would prefer to say the writer of John, the Johannine writer, “has organized his storytelling around a series of astounding ‘signs’ that reveal Jesus’ identity and mission. The feeding of the five thousand — the only miracle included in all four Gospels! — is the fourth of these signs.” **Jesus has the people lie down in these green pastures beside still waters, this gracious desire to feed them a reminder of the good shepherd who feeds the flock, and as the *Salt* commentator reminds us, a text in John we find after the resurrection in which Jesus commands Peter to “feed my sheep! (John 6:10; 21:17). The command “feed my sheep” will serve as a reminder to the Church that our primary responsibility is to feed those who are in need, whether that sustenance is physical or spiritual, or both.**

The feeding of the multitudes follows a familiar pattern of worship formed in ancient Judaism, followed by the early Church, and continued as a liturgical tradition right down to this very moment in this very time and space. The people are seated, thanksgiving for the meal is offered, and then those graciously loving gifts are distributed. The Greek term for thanksgiving is *eucharistesas*, from which we get the word Eucharist, a word that came to describe Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper, depending on traditional language. All would have gone well, all would have been great, just fine, just swell, had the crowd received these gracious gifts in the spirit in which they were given, an offering of divine proportions, an indication, a sign of the love of God poured out freely on each one of them, the fruits of an abundantly generous God who incessantly seeks to nourish and nurture humanity in every conceivably positive way. No, in their delusions of grandeur they saw this picnic as a glorious meal ticket, glory in this case a very negative image. They suddenly thought to themselves and everyone around them that Jesus could be the solution to their huge problem, addressing their political and social desires, a convenient means to an end. Glory hallelujah! Surely, this man of charisma and clairvoyance, a religious celebrity in the making, could achieve the overthrow of Rome and its oppressive imperial system of occupation, fulfilling their fervent wishes, their shallow definition of salvation. They no longer, perhaps they never did, want the peaceful way offered by this itinerant peasant preacher and reformer, but they wanted another king, and this one, however, they had determined, after clear visual evidence, could get it done because they believed he possessed all the power, all the miracle and magic, the hutzpah, necessary to drive their Roman occupiers from their ancestral land. Yes, he could lead a revolt and kick the tyrants back to Rome, back to the pagan empire from which these insidious interlopers came. Jesus offered grace, but the people wanted to glory! It was indeed a great gulf fixed, with no way to bridge the enormous gap, to even begin to reach consensus. How amazing it is that one meal, one amazing meal, could turn a people on a dime, charting in their minds a new and unfortunate course, a lesser, dark pathway, the road that should never have been taken, a course, however, they had longed for as an all-but-enslaved people, a sense of déjà vu a part of their daily grind. Somehow, yes, once again, this proud nation had managed to survive, and even thrive to a small degree, amidst the domination of an evil foe they evidently despised

more than the God they supposedly loved and served. Well eventually, perhaps inevitably so, they would seek to take Jesus by force and force him to do their bidding, to become what he never set out to become, an earthly ruler, a king, a liege threatening the powers and principalities of an autocratic, completely dictatorial, governmental authority. Despite the peer pressure, Jesus never bowed, never bent, never gave in to the whims of those who wanted a free ride, never accepting that shallow mantle. Jesus did not need to buy their allegiance, to curry favor, no bribe, no quid pro quo necessary. Those who followed, followed. Those who rejected, rejected. Even so, we all know how it ended, the rabbi convicted and condemned, guilty as charged! Unless of course Jesus was indeed complicit, leading a peasant revolt as some scholars suggest just might have actually been the case. Rome got wind of these unsettling stirrings, the smell of insurrection, sedition, in the air, and they stamped it out in the way that they always did, in the most grotesque, the most gruesome, heinous of ways, execution by crucifixion, making a brutal example of the humble man from Nazareth to all, a horrific visual reminder that you simply do not mess with Rome, you do not tempt fate!

The irony we can take away from the story is that, to this day, people continue to clamor to be fed, yearning for God to constantly feed the flock as if they were seated at a takeout stand or a divine buffet table. Yes, the Great Banquet Feast is a key component of Jesus' gospel message, a reality found in numerous Gospel texts, but it too is metaphorical, only to be fully realized in the eternal realm of God. Yes, there are glimpses in our world, revealed when anyone here on planet earth is hospitably welcomed and included, yes, fed! Feed me! Feed me, cry the masses and there is a plethora of clergy gurus, shaman-wanna-bes, along with their churches, many of them mega and MAGA, who claim that impossible ability, offering a menu, the gruel of cheap grace, and attempt to do just that, that very thing. As we continue our lectionary reading from the Gospel of John in the lections for next week, we continue to read about the crowds who were on a mission, passionately hunting for Jesus because they believed they had found in him a divine sugar daddy who would feed them, heal them, and even raise from the dead a few of them. Jesus was their Christly, Messianic, multitasker, a jack-of-all-trades, a man of many talents, a man of mystery, miracle, and magic, with the divine pedigree to prove it. Who wouldn't want to get on this gravy train? But it was so easy for the rabbi to see right through their motives, the true desires of their hearts, and it had nothing to do with honing their spiritual acumen. The writer notes that when they found Jesus on the other side of the lake, they asked him "Rabbi, when did you get here?" as if it were any of their business, as if he needed to report his whereabouts to them as they anticipated his next miraculous move, their next entree. Jesus said to them, no doubt dejectedly resigned to the least common denominator of their pedestrian survival instincts, reduced to the usual baseline dictating human nature, "I assure you that you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted. He then admonished them with what seems like an ominous word of warning, "Do not work for the food that does not last but for the food that endures for eternal life. . ."

Folks, the food of which he speaks is found in our life of service to the one we have chosen to follow, walking the sacred pathway of the man from Nazareth who always put others, yes, the least, and the most, of these, before his own needs. Yes, it is a tall order!

The bottom line to these wonderful feeding narratives describing the magic and the miraculous is that we are fed when we feed, yes, the proverbial cups of cold water surfacing once again, a metaphor calling us to do something. Feed, quench, clothe, visit! The child in the story willingly gave all that this youngster possessed in that sacred moment, offering this simplest, basic, of meals that no doubt had been prepared by a loving mother to ensure that her child did not go hungry on that adventuresome long day full of preaching and teaching. However the miracle was conceived, however it happened, however that transaction was manifest in those sacred, transcendent, moments, we know that everyone ate and was filled! Jesus may have broken the bread and blessed the fish, but without the abundant generosity of a little one who would lead them there would have been nothing with which Jesus could do his thing, work his brand of miracle, however we understand the miraculous. Yes, this is another “go and do likewise” message—I guess, to be honest they all are. This is a sermon we already get fully, a “be like” word to all of us who would somehow like to make a difference, a difference in the life of someone in need, a difference in our community, a difference in our world. All of us are blessed with the bare necessities, the bare minimum that is the equivalent of five loaves and two fish. Yes, we all have more than enough, all that we need for our own needs and for the needs of the world. The word to us all is to bless and break and give, all the while giving *eucharistias*, thanksgiving, offering our best from the abundant generosity that wells up within us when we even begin to consider all the goodness that is ours each and every day, the goodness, the very goodness, we are all called to share. The word that came to Peter in one of the many resurrection appearance narratives, while the Rock whined and complained about his status in that temporary pecking order, is the word to all of us, “Feed my sheep!” It is the gracious gift that keeps on giving, the most wonderful “regifting” we can offer!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and longs to feed us with the spiritual food that will sustain us for a lifetime! Amen and amen!