

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 12, Year B, July 29, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Feeding the 5000" & Blessing of Produce
John 6:1-21

I want to look at our Gospel story today and how it relates to all of us keeping our faith and the Bible's message relevant and alive for us; it seems to me that a common approach to a very familiar Bible story like our Gospel reading today, Jesus' feeding of the 5000, is to put that story up on a pedestal; when we do that we tend to think things like "oh, what a great miracle Jesus did way back when; this proves that Jesus was the Son of God; this validates my belief in him as the Savior of the world"—all of which are completely true—but they are also an abstraction, an oversimplification, and most of all, like anything else on a pedestal, removed from us and from our lives

to treat the feeding of the 5000 in this way supposes the story is only about Jesus and not about us; it is to take an approach which says something about Jesus without engaging our faith or our lives; it does not find there in that story any challenge to us, anything to which we need to respond; it is important to remember that while the Bible is about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the ways faithful people have over the centuries related to God, it is also always about us and about our relationship to God, now, and it always challenges us to respond to it some way in our lives, now

so the first thing we might do to pull this story down off its pedestal is to look at some of the significant details within it; and in the case of this story, we actually have four versions of it: one in each of the Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, 15:32-58, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17); in all of the versions except John's, the disciples come to Jesus with what seems like an obvious proposal: there are lots of people here, it's getting late, they're getting hungry, so let's send them off to go fend for themselves for dinner; that makes sense, that's realistic

but think about what that proposal is saying between the lines: the disciples are thinking, even if they are not saying, "we're not responsible for these people, we don't have anything we could give them, and we really shouldn't be bothered anyway;" but Jesus is in a different frame of mind, because he has compassion for the crowd; and compassion doesn't rely on obvious

proposals; and so Jesus' response to his disciples, again in the three other versions, is a surprising "you give them something to eat"

they say that all that's available is five loaves of bread and two fish; and they know that certainly isn't going to be enough; but Jesus is going to supply them in ways they could never have imagined; they provide the five loaves and two fish, but Jesus takes their limited resources, blesses, increases, and multiplies them to accomplish a far greater thing with them; that's still true for all of our ministries today too; we offer the limited resources we have of buildings, money, and people, and Christ blesses, increases, and multiplies our work into greater accomplishments than we ever could have achieved on our own; all of these details are important: Jesus' compassion, the initial 'no can do' attitude of the disciples, Jesus' command for them to do something anyway, and Jesus' eventual participation with them in carrying out their ministry

the next thing we might do to pull this story down off its pedestal is to place ourselves within the story; Jesus has told his disciples how to respond in this particular situation, and from that it's up to us to interpret how we, as Jesus' current day disciples, are to apply his approach in any number of similar situations; certainly there are so many examples of great need about us in our world today; Jesus' commandment is simply this: "you || give them || something"

it doesn't really matter who the 'you' is, as long as you are part of it: individual, family, neighborhood, church group, non-profit, etc; it doesn't really matter who you give to: individual, family, group, non-profit, etc; and it doesn't really matter what it is you give: food, shelter, resources, caring, etc; this would include all of the outreach ministries we carry out at Christ Church, but would go far beyond them too; it would be a helpful exercise for each of us to ask ourselves how we have actually responded to this commandment of Jesus' in the past, what we are doing to respond to it now, and how we plan to respond to it in the future; ask yourself "what exactly am I giving, and to whom?"

what matters most is that each of us does continually respond to Jesus' commandment; that we do it with the same kind of compassion he demonstrated; that we not fall into the 'no can do' or worse the 'not my responsibility' attitude of the disciples; and that we recognize that Jesus is always participating along with us as we carry out his ministries; in the end,

that Jesus did great miracles, is the Son of God, and is the Savior of the world, only makes a practical difference to you and to me and to the world if we, and each of his disciples, put into action his compassion and his ministries of giving and sharing; if we don't, our faith, our church, Christianity itself may amount to little more than a statue up on a pedestal

as a footnote, you recall that as we blessed the backpacks last Sunday I said that we really don't bless things; and today, similarly, as we ask God to bless the produce from our Food Pantry Garden, we are really asking God to use this produce to nourish and sustain the folks who will eat it—it is our Food Pantry neighbors who will receive God's blessings; you will hear that blessing prayer in a few moments, and I will put the text of it with this sermon on the website

I also wanted to share with you an image that came to my mind as I was praying about this Gospel passage and about the blessing of the produce; the image was of passing out cucumber slices instead of wafers at the altar rail; sounds silly; but really, isn't the food that grows out of the ground almost as miraculous as the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes? the produce wouldn't increase and multiply without God's intervention, without God giving us the sun, the rain, the soil, the plants, and the knowledge of how to grow them; what if we ate and drank everything that we put into our mouths with the same wonder as the people who experienced the feeding of the 5000, because we are aware of God's miraculous intervention? and what if we ate and drank everything that we put into our mouths with the same reverence we bring to Holy Communion? that's food for thought, food for prayer ...

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Blessing of Produce

Most gracious God, by whose power the sun shines warm and bright and the clouds drop down the dew and rain: We give you hearty thanks and praise for the return of seedtime and harvest, for the produce of the ground and the gathering in of its fruits, and for all the other blessings of your merciful providence given to all the peoples of the earth. We thank you for those who have planned, planted, fenced, watered, weeded, and toiled in our Food Pantry

Garden. Today we ask your blessing upon the entire season's produce of our garden and upon those who have and will continue to receive and enjoy the produce from our garden. Through the food you provide, nourish, strengthen, and heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.