

Sermon for Loaves and Fishes Sunday ~ June 27, 2010

Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas

The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Today, we are observing Loaves and Fishes Sunday. We're doing this because donations of food and funds tend to drop off during the summer vacation season. But hunger never takes a vacation. It's easier to remember the hungry during the cold winter months, but they are not on our minds as much during the summer. So, we need a reminder.

The story of the Loaves and Fishes is included in years A and B in our lectionary, but not year C, this year. So the Bishop has given his permission to use Luke's account of this miracle for this important emphasis on feeding the hungry. This event in the life of Jesus, also known as The Feeding of the Five Thousand, is the only miracle to be recorded in all four Gospels.

In some ways, The Feeding of the Five Thousand was the most impressive miracle Jesus had performed up until this point in his ministry. Those with the inclination to do so could have explained many of the other miracles away, but not this one.

Three factors made the Feeding of the Five Thousand into what we might call a "media event." First is the fact that there were over five thousand witnesses. Second, they were in a wide-open place. There was no place where enough food to feed that big a crowd could have been hidden. Everyone could see the miracle with their own eyes. And third, the miracle met an immediate need, not just of one person among many onlookers, but also of every single person in the crowd. So they were all focused on what was happening. You can't silence five thousand plus witnesses to an event and nor can you dismiss their testimony.

What then is the theological and spiritual significance of this miracle? Firstly, Jesus is revealed as Lord of Creation, the One who multiplies food in Nature. In his classic work *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis shows how many of the miracles take what God normally does slowly in Nature and speeds it up dramatically as a kind of flourished signature, signifying, "the One who always multiplies fish and grain is here."

Secondly, Jesus is also revealed as the Lord who Provides. And what does he provide here? What promise does he keep? What need does he meet? Is it the need of the hungry or is it the need of the disciples? Or is it both? He has commanded the disciples to feed the people and that elicits their admission that they are not able to do it. Then, to their amazement, he tells them to have the people sit on the grass anyway. The need being met here is not only the people's need for food, though of course that is abundantly provided for. The other need that is met is the disciples' need to be able to minister! It is not the people's ability to eat so much as the disciples' ability to serve, not so much the people's need to be fed as the disciples' ability to feed them. Our Lord still provides for his servants today in the same way. Not one of us could so much as give a cup of cold water in his name in a way that would truly glorify him apart from the grace that makes it possible. Do we wish to serve the Lord? Do we confess our utter inability to do so worthily? Do you have just five loaves and two fish? Then you are in the same position as Jesus' disciples were on this day. He has not changed his administrative policy. It is our job only to make our inadequate loaves and fishes available. It is his job to make them enough.

The people got a good meal but the disciples received something far more significant. They got another in the series of lessons in faith that Luke seems to be presenting. We have already seen at the Stilling of the Storm that faith is an understanding of who Jesus is that produces confidence in his solution of our problems. We saw with the healing of the Woman with the Issue of Blood that it is a personal response to Jesus as Lord and Savior, not a superstitious trust in externals. What will Luke add to that understanding today?

The disciples identified a problem, a need to be met: how are we going to feed all these people out here in the middle of nowhere? So they came to Jesus with a solution to the problem already in mind: we'd better send the people away to the villages to try to find some food and lodging on their own. They not only brought Jesus a problem, but also offered a solution. But as often happens, Jesus had a different solution in mind: "You give them something to eat!" At this point, the disciples must have recognized that they were being asked to do the humanly impossible. They freely confess their inability. And what is Jesus' response to that? "Okay, tell the people to sit down in groups to facilitate our passing out the food!"

This is the most interesting and instructive moment in the whole story. For it shows that the disciples had learned something from those previous lessons. They obeyed. And, they did it immediately. Before Jesus had multiplied a single loaf or fish, they obeyed him. Jesus had not even told them what he was planning to do yet they trusted him to come through. He just took the meager provisions they had and told them to arrange the people to be served. If only the disciples could have responded like this more consistently! If only we would!

The disciples obeyed, and in that obedience they learned another important lesson about faith, one whose elements are still present in every mighty work of God: Need seen + desire felt + inadequacy confessed + Christ obeyed = the opportunity for God to work in miraculous ways. It is our job only to make our inadequate loaves and fishes available. It is his job to make them enough. Faith is the determination to obey in spite of our inadequacy, to consider our own inability irrelevant in the light of his ability, and to act on that basis. The more we do so, the more we will find our own paltry loaves and fishes multiplied.

In each of the four Gospels, this event is a turning point – a time of transition – in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Disciples often learn important lessons during times of transition. It marks the apex of his popularity with the multitudes, and understandably so. But from this point his popularity begins to decline. Why? Because in each Gospel Jesus now concentrates his teaching on preparing himself and his disciples for the Cross. From this moment he starts toward Jerusalem and the way of the Cross. It is not easy to obey, to sit people down at the table when you do not yet see any fish or bread to set before them. But the greater test of faith is to follow Christ in the way that leads to the cross. We are as inadequate to this as we were to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two small fish. But, by the grace of Jesus Christ, those hungry people were fed by those disciples. And, by the same grace, the hungry people who are standing at those red doors are going to be fed by the disciples in this place because as we walk with him in the way of the cross, the Lord of our lives and of all Creation empowers us and says to us, "You give them something to eat!"

- 3.8 million households, (3.5 percent of all U.S. households) are referred to as food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry at least some time during the year because they could not afford enough food.

- 30 % of children in Kansas are living below poverty. (Kansas Action for Children)
- About 13% of households in Kansas were food insecure before the recession (FRAC-State of Kansas, 2008)
- In May 2010, Trinity Interfaith Food Pantry provided 169 bags of food to hungry people in our own community.