

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 12
Year B

2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalm 145:10-19
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

In the Gospel reading from Mark last week, I mentioned that the portion of the chapter we skipped was the feeding of the 5000. This event was so important that all four of the Gospels include it. Thus, we have the account of this feeding from the Gospel according to John this week. I find it interesting that the people who created the lectionary coupled this account with the event in 2 Kings which is also a feeding of a multitude - this time by Elisha.

There are many similarities between these two stories. In the case of Elisha, we are told that a man is bringing his offering to the man of God. This offering was from the first fruits of his harvest - primarily barley because it ripens earlier than wheat. We are told he brings twenty barley loaves and a sack of grain. While twenty loaves of bread sounds to us like a large amount, a normal person would eat three barley loaves in a single meal. Therefore, twenty loaves is only enough for three or four people. That is why the prophet's servant struggled with the command to feed one hundred people with these loaves. Similar to the story in the Gospels, all were fed and there were leftovers. What are we to make of this?

Like the great prophet Elijah whom he followed, Elisha was an outsider - someone who preached against the ruling political, religious, and popular classes. But also like Elijah, he was open to the miraculous powers of God, as is shown in this incident. We are given a peek into the nature of the community which formed around these men of God.

There are three qualities which defined life in this community - stewardship, hospitality, and an expectation of abundance. These attributes are grounded in an underlying faith in the power of God. These qualities are interdependent in a holy life.

The story opens with the exercise of stewardship by the man bringing his offering of the first fruits of his harvest to the prophet. He gives the first, the best produce of his fields to God. He shows his trust that when the rest of the harvest comes in, there will be enough for his family. His thanksgiving is an embodiment of his faith in God's provision. Thus, we have the convergence of two virtues - faith and thanksgiving.

From his act of stewardship emerges hospitality. Hospitality was central to the life of all people in that region. We can look back to the hospitality that Abraham showed the guests who arrived at his tent, or the many other similar stories of acts of hospitality provided in scripture. This was a core attribute in every nomadic culture and one that Jesus also displayed. Whether that hospitality comes from a place of abundance or one of scarcity, it is a central act of caring for one another which is at the heart of everything Jesus taught.

Out of the act of stewardship and the act of hospitality flows the abundance of God. God's abundance could only be manifested in these other acts - the fact that all ate and there was food left over was only because the gift of the produce of a man's labors was offered and then was shared by all. We see the same dynamic at work in the Gospel story - food offered by the boy through the disciples and shared with the multitude who had come to Jesus. Only then was it possible for God's abundance to show forth. Both Elisha and Jesus intervened in the lives of ordinary people to provide for their material needs so that they could receive the message from God.