

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 13
Year A

Isaiah 55:1-5
Psalm 145:8-9, 15-22
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

The story told in today's Gospel reading is the only miracle presented in all four gospels. Obviously, it had great meaning for the early church. Does it also have great meaning for us today?

Many sermons have been written about this miracle, usually focusing on the abundance of food provided from very meager resources – five loaves and two fish. I believe there is more to this story than that. As we look at the story itself and ignore the actual miracle, there is much for us to glean from this incident that might guide us in the 21st century.

First, we need to remember what was happening just prior to this incident. Matthew has just broken the news that John the Baptist had been brutally murdered by Herod. Jesus decided that He and the disciples needed a break – perhaps a little vacation. Thus, they got into a boat and traveled to a deserted place. Many times we see Jesus try to get away for prayer or rest. This is one of those times. But as happened in most of these cases, the crowds would not leave them alone. While Jesus and the disciples crossed the sea by boat, the crowds hurried along on shore to greet them when they landed. Here is where we get to the heart of the story for us today.

First, this story tells that God is love. In spite of His desire for rest, Jesus is moved by compassion for the crowd that greets Him. However, His compassion is not just a feeling, but a motivating factor in His life. He was moved to supply the most basic needs of the people – not just His close friends, but the great multitude who came to Him. While we all say that God is love, here we Jesus put that love into action.

The second point focuses on the disciples. They were also seeking rest. However, they came to Jesus with a plea for the crowd. They saw the need of all these people and suggested that Jesus send them into the surrounding towns to get food. Perhaps they understood that few had provisions to get them through the night. Like the disciples, we need to show our faith in Christ by having compassion for those in need around us. It is not only the role of a deacon to bring the needs of the community to the church. It is imperative for all of us to, not only see the need, but to bring that need to the attention of us all.

The disciples brought the need to Jesus. His response was not what they had expected. Instead of agreeing to send the crowds off, Jesus told them that they were to feed the crowd. We can only imagine their reaction. Here was a huge crowd – over 5000 people – and Jesus expected them to feed them all! As might be expected, they took stock of their resources. What did they have at hand to feed such a mass of people? In reality, not much. But in faith believing, they brought this meager offering to Jesus, not quite sure what He would do.

After having everyone sit down, Jesus blessed the food and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the people. Contrary to how most Bibles label this incident, Jesus did not feed the crowd – the disciples did. We can envision them walking through the crowd, breaking off pieces of bread and placing those pieces into people's hands. They just kept breaking off pieces and handing them out, the portion of the loaves they had was not diminishing. Jesus did not hand out huge quantities of bread and fish. He only gave the disciples pieces to distribute and the multiplication happened in their hands.

While the disciples probably felt powerless in the face of this large crowd in need of food, they had full faith that Jesus had an answer. They knew that God loves and cares for everyone and that Jesus had compassion for this crowd. We also see in this story that God works through us. Jesus did not distribute the food; that was the role of the disciples. We often say that we are the hands and feet of God in this world. That is the example the disciples are giving us today. Further, God promises us in the Holy Spirit that the love of God can break through any barrier, even in the face of incredible odds.

We are called to be partners with God in making life livable for all. God wants us to take our place in helping those we meet to enjoy the fullness of God's grace and love each and every day. The task might seem too great, as it did for the disciples that day, but through faith, we can show God's love to all in need.