

Year A Proper 13
Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 17:1-7, 16
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21
August 2, 2020

I'm sure all of you have noticed that the gospel lessons recently have been filled with parables. Jesus, like many wise people over the ages, knew that metaphors were a good way to illustrate things that are hard to explain. Indeed, we usually can't explain anything divine without resorting to metaphors. We say the Holy Spirit is *like* a wind, or a flame; God's love is *like* a hen sheltering her chicks under her wings; Jesus is the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. These are all metaphors. Jesus used metaphors to help his listeners to better understand what he was trying to say. Or, to puzzle them into thinking deeply about something that might have many layers of meaning. When I work with the Spanish interpreters at the hospital, they tell me they often struggle to interpret my prayers, because they are full of metaphorical language. But it's hard to describe God straight out.

Today, though, we don't have a parable, we have a miracle story: it's often called the feeding of the 5,000. Here we see Jesus and his disciples feeding "5,000 men, besides women and children"—so really an uncounted multitude of people. Although today we don't go in so much for miracles, this story was so popular in the Early Church that we find it in all four gospels, with slight variations. It's a wonderful narrative of God's grace and abundance, and even though it's not a parable like the other stories we've heard recently, it's still a metaphor. Here we see what God's kingdom is really *like*.

Today's story takes place just after the murder of John the Baptist. Remember that Salome asked for John's head on a platter, as a reward for her dancing, and Herod gave it to her. John's disciples have just now told Jesus about what happened. You can imagine how they must have felt: for John—a prophet, and their master—to have been killed in such a thoughtless and brutal way, it was devastating. So Jesus "withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." He is grieving the murder of his cousin John—and he wants to be alone. "But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns." They, too are horrified and grief-stricken and they want Jesus' reassurance in the face of this disaster. When Jesus comes ashore he finds a huge crowd of people waiting for him. What does he do? Does he chastise them in annoyance? Does he say, "can't you leave me alone in my grief?" Does he send them away? No the gospel says "he has compassion on them." Jesus has compassion. This is one of the important lessons we see here in this story. Jesus is God's love in the flesh—he is God incarnate—and so he shows God's love by having compassion on the crowd, perceiving their grief and their distress. He heals their sick—hundreds, maybe thousands of sick people. Sick in body, sick in mind, sick in spirit, Jesus is in solidarity with their suffering, and he has compassion on them. We see this is what God is like.

Eventually, of course it starts to get dark, and is time for dinner. The disciples tell Jesus to send people away so that they can find something in the surrounding towns. But Jesus says, "They need not go away; **you** give them something to eat." Again, imagine how they felt, looking out

over the thousands of people spread out in every direction. “What? How are we going to feed them?!” Their response points to their perception of scarcity. They say, “We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish.” Really, they were probably thinking, that won’t even feed us, much less all of these folks. It might as well be nothing. But Jesus takes the loaves and the fish, and has everyone sit down, then he looks up to heaven, and blesses and breaks the bread. This foreshadows his actions at the Last Supper, of course, and echoes our communion services. It’s probably one of the reasons that this story was so popular. Notice now that Jesus doesn’t distribute the bread himself, he gives it *to the disciples to distribute*. And here is another truth of this story: Jesus works through **us**. Just as it was with his own disciples, Jesus uses our hands to do his work. It is God’s love, God’s grace, God’s abundance, but it is through us that this work is still done.

And notice it says: “All ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” Not only did everyone eat until they were satisfied, but there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Here is another truth for us in the miracle story: *there is no scarcity*. Especially in the U.S. we habitually act from a posture of scarcity—we act as if there is not, or won’t be, enough. We are always trying to get more, to expand the economy, to compete for the most, the best—but what if there **is no** scarcity? What if there really is enough for everyone, with some to spare? How would it change our lives if we agreed to shift our thinking to being satisfied with “enough.” The disciples said they had “nothing” to give away, not trusting that Jesus would provide. Even after having been with him for so long, and seeing him perform miracles, they still didn’t have faith. What would it look like to believe that there is always enough?

A couple of years ago I had an elderly patient who was told that she was not really well enough to leave the hospital, and that she would probably not ever be; in fact, her last days would be there, with us. As I sat with her and her gentleman friend of many decades, she looked at him and said, “you know I always wanted to be a bride, but we never felt like we could afford to get married.” He nodded. “There was always something more important that we needed to spend money on,” he agreed. “I wish we could have gotten married, too. You would have been a beautiful bride.” At this point I was almost in tears. “You can get married here, if you want to,” I said. They were amazed, and protested that they had no money for a license, or anything. “Let me see what we can do,” I said.

And over the next two days we made it happen. The social worker arranged for the city clerk to come to the patient’s room for the license, and someone paid the fee. One of the other chaplains and I printed service bulletins in our office. The nurses in the patient’s unit decorated her room with streamers and balloons and paper flowers, and when the president of the hospital heard what was happening, he provided white frosted cupcakes. The day of the ceremony I went out into the grounds of the hospital and cut every flowering thing I could find and took it to the manager of the gift shop. She made a glorious bridal bouquet, and a boutonniere for the groom, which he wore on his t-shirt. One of the nurses gave the patient a lacy shawl to wear over her hospital gown. That afternoon her room was filled with joyful people celebrating a wedding that sealed

decades of love. After the service, the bride was resting in her bed, and her husband said, “I always knew you’d be a beautiful bride.”

What would it look like if **you** believed that there is no scarcity? God is love; Jesus works through us. It is enough.

Amen