

When the Going Gets Tough, The Tough Get Going
Cooke's-Portsmouth

August 6, 2017

Matthew 14: 13-21

In an age of post- modern sensibility it is difficult to fully understand the miracles of Jesus. The skeptic will be quick to suggest that if it happened once why does it not happen again? The world is full of hungry people who could all benefit from a miraculous increasing of scarcity to abundance; food for all. I will proffer the loaves and fishes and even pray for God's blessing and allow the Holy Spirit to do the rest. I do not think that I betray my faith in a benevolent God when I suggest that miracles are never as simple as they seem. So before we wrestle with the miraculous, why don't we contemplate the humanity in the story? It is rife with examples of human propensity and response and yet we scarce take the time to consider the whole of the story.

First the passage begins 13 verses in so what happened prior to this event? What was it that so impacted on the soul and psyche of Jesus that he needed to withdraw to a deserted place and be alone? He had received word that Herod, in response to the request of his wife, Herodias, had ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. To receive word that a relative and fellow prophet had been martyred is difficult enough to assimilate; but for a servant of God to die unnecessarily and in so cruel and disgusting a means is devastating. Jesus needed time away to grieve; to question; to pray; to contemplate. A very human response in the wake of a tragedy. But his solace is interrupted in very short order.

The masses who throng after him follow on foot and when Jesus arrives on shore he is moved by compassion to minister to them. And despite his grief and the heaviness on his heart he sets to work healing, teaching and as the day ebbs the disciples want to be left alone in peace. Despite their disclosure that the space that they occupy is desolate: far removed from town and shops and homes they beg Jesus to call it a day; send the crowds home to find food for themselves. But Jesus is not so readily allayed and his response to the disciples is surprising and perhaps a little harsh: no need to send them home. If they are hungry then you feed them.

There is little at their disposal: five small loaves of bread and two dried fish; perhaps a lunch that one of the disciples had had the presence of mind of to pack. The first pot luck that the church became famous for. And while we should not detract from the miracle of so little going so far what is compelling at this point is the story is the refusal of Jesus to allow his disciples to identify a problem and pose no possible solution. If you see that people are hungry then do something to address their need.

Don't turn a blind eye. Don't see it as their problem and not yours. Do something. You are no more or less hungry and thirsty than they so don't just think about yourselves. Don't assume that that we are going to build a fire and heat up this small offering for our own consumption while they wind their way to home to possible empty larders. Don't be blind to their reality; share it and do something to address it.

I am sure that everyone is familiar with the children's story Stone Soup. Some travelers come to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. Upon their arrival, the villagers are unwilling to share any of their food stores with the hungry travelers. Then the travelers go to a stream and fill the pot with water, drop a large stone in it, and place it over a fire. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what they are doing. The travelers answer that they are

making "stone soup", which tastes wonderful, although it still needs a little bit of garnish to improve the flavor, which they are missing. The villager does not mind parting with a few carrots to help them out, so that gets added to the soup. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the pot, and the travelers again mention their stone soup which has not reached its full potential yet. The villager hands them a little bit of seasoning to help them out. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient. Finally, the stone is removed from the pot, and a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is enjoyed by all. Although the travelers have thus tricked the villagers into sharing their food with them, they have successfully transformed it into a tasty and nutritious meal which they share with the donors. A little can still go a long way when enhanced by grace. Sometimes we forget that to be provided for and to have our needs met are indeed miraculous moments themselves. Providing for the crowds also meant that the disciples ate their fill as well. Which brings us to the second miracle of the story according to David Lose.

Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper, Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity – “we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes” – to one of abundance – “thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes.” Whatever their initial skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy that “all ate and were filled.” God used even these reluctant disciples, that is, to care for the poor and hungry that God loves so much.

And that miracle continues. When a college-grad eschews a high-paying job in order to teach disadvantaged kids, God’s miracles continue. When a parent puts career on the back burner to care for a special-needs child, God is working that same kind of miracle. When a church makes

the wrenchingly difficult decision to celebrate its faithful service and close its doors after significant decline in order that another ministry might flourish, miracles abound. When one student stands up against bullies in defense of another student, the God of compassion is again miraculously revealed. When a fledgling community of faith makes a promise that no one that comes to its doors will be turned away hungry, God is still at work performing miracles through disciples eager, reluctant, and everything in between. (David Lose Working Preacher). When the going gets tough, the tough get going; an adage that the church needs to appreciate, contemplate and integrate in this time of transition and change. Jesus blessed the loaves and fishes and then handed them to the disciples. If a chain is only as strong as its weakest link then even the prayers of the Incarnate One require human hands to execute.

This story of the feeding of the 5000 is not just about the miraculous power of God incarnate in Christ but is a teaching on discipleship. Like the disciples of Jesus we too may want to respond in similar ways when we are tired and simply want the day to end. We don't want to see that it is our responsibility to look after the masses. It is not our fault that someone has found themselves in a dire situation. We may want to adopt the saying that they made their bed now lie in it. If you are hungry go home and eat! But the message of Jesus to his disciples throughout time has been if you see a need then do not be blind to it: do something about it! And the true miracle of the story ensues when the disciples look past themselves and roll up their sleeves and do something; despite fatigue. Teresa of Avila, catholic mystic and founder of a religious order in the late Middle Ages once said: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours

are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Find the faith to believe in the power of prayer to transform scarcity into abundance.

Dare to see yourself as God sees you: capable of dispensing grace regardless of age, experience, strength and shyness.

Open your eyes to the abundance that surrounds and do not feel the need to hoard. Perhaps others in the crowd proffered their loaves and fishes so that all might have a little.

See yourself as one of Christ’s disciples with hands, feet, eyes, ears and lips to offer in service.

Trust that even a small gesture can make a great difference.

Be as Christ: moved by compassion and do not judge the reason a person needs help; simply respond with compassion.

Emulate the example of Christ when you are grieved and when the cruelty of the world is too much with you. Withdraw to a secluded place to vent, pray, weep and lament and then return to madding crowd empowered by compassion to heal and make better.

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”

This is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.