

Pentecost 9 B 2021

July 24 and 25, 2021 at Covenant Maple Heights and Triune Broadview Heights

John 6:1-21; 2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 3:14-21

Pastor Jimmy Madsen, retired

The story of feeding a very large crowd is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels, unless you count the Resurrection, which we usually think of in a category all its own. In the Gospel According to John, miracles are referred to as signs; signs of the identity of Jesus and signs that the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world.

There are some interesting symbolic things happening in John's account of the story. We are told that the festival of the Passover was near, so we can't help but make some connection with this sign and the bread of Passover. That can also get us thinking about the whole Exodus event and God feeding the people in the wilderness with manna. We also associate Moses with a mountain, just as Jesus is teaching on a mountain. The creators of our lectionary series have also helped us make a connection with the Elisha story where the great prophet had also fed a crowd with very little food.

The early Christian community that John was writing to would also likely be thinking about communion and perhaps seeing this story as a foreshadowing of the bread they shared in worship each week. Interestingly, the first section of signs in John begins with Jesus making wine at a wedding, and this story begins the second section. So, within the first six chapters of John there are signs/miracles with both wine and bread, the elements of communion.

John is also the only Gospel that tells us the loaves were barley. Scholars tell us that wheat was more expensive then, so barley was the bread of poor people. I have often wondered why this little boy had five loaves and two fish. Was he with his family and it was for all of them, or was he hoping to sell the loaves and fish to make some money for his family? We don't know, but the detail that this was barley, the bread of the poor, is interesting.

It is hard to imagine how Jesus did this sign and we obviously cannot duplicate it; but I want to encourage us to think about it not just as something Jesus did long ago, but as a continuing sign of God's Kingdom. Feeding the poor would become an important ministry of the early church that has continued down to our day.

You may remember from the book of Acts that one of the first things the early church did was to set apart deacons, like Stephen, whose job it was to fairly distribute food to those in need. This is perhaps the first church committee ever appointed.

But taking we all know that taking care of those in need can be challenging because of the resources that are required. Did you notice that the first objection to the idea of feeding the crowd was about the very practical problem of money? Phillip immediately pointed out that six months of the average wage would not buy enough to feed them. Then Andrew pointed out that there was a boy with some bread and fish, but just a quickly he talked himself out of it being a viable option. But for Jesus it was not too little.

I volunteer once a week at a food pantry in a church where food is still multiplied. We give away thousands of dollars in meat and other food every Tuesday morning; and the pantry is part of a ministry that has been doing this since the 1984. It has never run out of money. Volunteers, donations, fundraising and the Second Harvest pantry system make it possible. It's as if lots of little boys and girls with a few loaves and fish have offered what they have, and it is multiplied week after week. I'm also involved with a free clinic and the numbers are even more staggering. Around three million dollars of medical care is given to poor people every year. The clinic has been operating since 1986 and the money has never run out.

If the founders of these ministries would have had money as their first concern, they would have talked themselves out of even trying. But thankfully the voice of Jesus is still speaking in his church; he says give it to me and let's see what we can make of it. We certainly need people in the church who are good with money and ask the practical questions. But that can never be the first question that sets the agenda. If it is, we will talk ourselves out of everything.

It is not uncommon that when I ask food recipients how they are doing, they answer "I am blessed." And that is true of all of us whether we have a lot or relatively little. God gives us daily bread and much, much more, even enough to share with someone who for one reason or another does not have enough. This is a sign, a sign of the identity of Jesus in his church and a sign of the Kingdom of God here and now.

