

Sunday, August 3, 2008

Matthew 14: 13-21

It was another day in the life of Jesus and his disciples. It quickly however turns into a day of shocking news. Some of John's own disciples brought the horrifying news to Jesus. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, and in a sense, his colleague in ministry, had been executed by King Herod. It is a point not to be missed that Jesus and his own disciples are in Galilee, Herod's territory, when they get this news.

So perhaps in shock and dismay, Jesus and the disciples withdraw to a quiet place, taking a boat on the Sea of Galilee, hoping for some time apart to pray and gather their thoughts.

Jesus was not setting out on the deep waters of the lake though. He just followed along the shoreline. From where he was sitting in the boat, he could see what was happening on the shore. And what was happening on the shore was that crowds were assembling, following along the shore as Jesus' boat continued to sail up and down the shore. Jesus could probably hear them, so neither solitude nor silence was possible. Whenever he would pull ashore, he knew what he would find. The crowds, walking alongshore and growing in number by the hour all day long, were waiting for him, needy.

That was all the rest he would get. Because another reality had dawned.

He landed the boat and went to the crowd, and got to work, moved by his compassion for them. We do not know what first-century healing actions may have looked like. The models most of us are familiar with may come from 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century televangelists. No mention is made of any specific healing ritual Jesus used. Perhaps he laid his hands on them, prayed for them, and declared them well as we have seen in stories of specific healings throughout the gospels. But ultimately we do not know what he did or said.

What we do know is that Jesus continued this activity until it was nearly dark. The sun was going down. There were still thousands of people around, either watching or waiting for their own healing to come. Jesus' disciples, handlers if ever there were some, try to encourage him to stop and send the crowd home to eat. He turns the tables on them so to speak. No, he says, it is not up to these villages around here the people in them to feed these folks who have traveled here for healing. No, it is up to you. You figure out a way to feed them.

You know the answer. Five loaves and two fish. That's all we've got! Jesus receives their meager fare and tells the disciples to seat the crowd. He then lifts up the bread and fish skyward, a gesture of offering, blessed them, broke the loaves (a standard act for the host to do for his guests) and gave them back to the disciples to feed the crowd. All ate their fill. The remains were more abundant than the initial gifts, 12 baskets full.

The parallel to Holy Communion seems obvious. We take the bread and wine offered. We bless God and we seek God's blessing on the bread. We break it and distribute it to those gathered. We gather up the remains, resetting the table. And then we are sent, fed and healed, into the world and the next places of ministry.

But there are deeper parallels here too, or there may be...if we are really Christ's body, active in his ministry wherever we are. We get shocking news almost every day of some new horror or atrocity from the powers that be – Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Zimbabwe, the city, the list is seemingly endless. Sometimes, these things shock our souls, and we feel the need to get away, to stop in our tracks, to regroup. We try, and we perhaps do a little, but we are aware of all the

ways the crowds who want God's blessing and healing power are waiting for us. Eventually, we return to the work of witnessing to God's realm of shalom and justice – whether healing the sick, feeding the hungry, banishing the demons, or cleansing the lepers, in whatever forms we are blessed to witness or offer – driven by the compassion of Christ at work in our very own bodies.

And the temptation we face in our ministries in Christ's name may be the very same ones Jesus' disciples faced – to send all the needy people off to be fed and cared for elsewhere by others, or to think what we have to offer is not enough, or to assume that what we have in our hands to offer is actually all there is or may be.

Jesus' simple action of feeding a crowd with what began as the offering of all the disciples, or maybe a single little boy, who knows, had showed up all of these temptations. God's abundance is right here, right now, wherever right here and whenever right now may be. We think we don't have enough not because our supplies are too small, but because our "we" is too small. "We" don't have enough, we think. And our "we" includes a God whom we have made too small. The "we" is the gifts of all of us that we

discredit by minimizing. The “we” that is too small is that we think we are too small to make a difference...me, you, this church. But the fact of the matter is, the gifts that are “out there” are far more numerous than the gifts that are “in here.” It’s only when we as the body of Christ get out there does what we have in here make any difference at all.

That is how it is in God’s economy, in God’s realm, in the way God does business in this world. God does it by growing, not by adding, but by multiplying. By becoming “viral.”

This week, like most every week, we have lived in a world that is sick and needy, just like that crowd on the lake shore. And now it is time for us to join them in needing dinner as the day ends. Just know this...you, me, us, we will not be fed if we hoard our small portions for ourselves. But we are fed as Jesus fed the crowds long ago. We confess our shock at what we have seen this week, at what we have done and what we have not done to make any difference. We return to the shore to offer restoration to others. We take what we bring. We bless God and these small gifts, offering then and ourselves to God for God to transform them into something powerful and big. We share the bread. We drink the wine. We share it, small fragments of a loaf, and a

sip of the cup. And lo and behold it is enough...more than enough. We are satisfied with and by Jesus, and we are ready to face the world again next week.

This story of 5000 being fed with a few loaves and fish and this table of bread and cup both teach us that our ministry is God’s not ours. Our ministry is not to think that we ourselves will transform the world. How wrong and egotistical is that? Our ministry is to know that our Master has called us to declare and to embody God’s transformation, knowing that indeed all the materials needed to satisfy the hunger and the need of this world is already in place. Hear that, all that we need to fix this world, to feed every empty stomach, to heal every disease, to stop every war, all that we need is right here and right now. It is just not being deployed in the right way.

And knowing this, we know too that in all the brokenness of this world we bring ourselves, just as we are, and that despite our failing at patching it up (thought we try, bless our souls!) that in the simple act of offering ourselves to God and offering our gifts to God, we are indeed all fed and changed. Thanks be to God.