

Pentecost 9A

Matthew 14.13-21

Sunday, August 2, 2020

A friend once noted, “We take the Bible so seriously that we don’t take it literally.” Such a statement, at first glance, may seem to run counter to the thinking of many. Indeed, for so many the Bible is *so* sacred, it *must* be taken literally. The fear is that if one jot or tittle is not literally true, then the whole thing falls apart. Yet, one of the dangers of religious thought is to take things so seriously that we accept the stories from the Bible literally. And you can see the allure of doing so. When it comes to the feeding of the 5000 for instance, who *doesn’t* want to read this story literally? It’s awesome! A miracle! God unequivocally active in the world. Indisputable divine provision for human need. From five loaves of bread and two fish, the laws of nature are transcended and people are fed. Jesus shows his power over the natural world. And everyone benefits in the end. An honest-to-God miracle! What’s not to like about that? Why not read it literally?

Yet, when we read the story in this way, we also lose something powerful and meaningful in the process. We end up consigning the story to the annals of history. Oh, the miracle was something else alright, yet the amazing feat remains locked in the past, when and where it happened, because it no longer happens. The miracle no longer finds expression, especially in our own day. Have any of you participated in a miraculous feeding with thousands of others? Thought so.

Thus, the story becomes like a championship trophy sitting in a high school awards case; it gathers dust. It may inspire us--what an amazing act! What must it have been like to be there?!--but we have no illusion that God will act that way for us, now, in our need. And there is any number of folks wishfully thinking that *maybe* God could repeat this miracle one more time. While the Word of God may not be literal; it, nevertheless is living and active and dynamic. It is not meant to sit on the shelf. God's Word is active in the world, even today. Perhaps, or maybe precisely, when the laws of nature are not transcended. Still God acts. Seeking to discern where the Word is manifest is part of the exercise of our faith in this day. The miracle may not take place in exactly the same way. However, the reality of other miracles in our own day, confronting us cannot be denied.

Parker Palmer, Quaker theologian and popular author, tells the best story regarding the gospel that we just heard, Jesus feeding the 5000. The story takes place in that time, long ago when there were no security lines at airports, no electronic screening, and you could carry pretty much whatever you wanted in your briefcase or purse onto the airplane. Palmer was on a flight from O'Hare to Denver that pulled away from the gate, and taxied for a *long* time. You know the feeling. You look out the window and you're not near a runway in line to take off but are out in a remote corner of the airport looking at a chain-link perimeter fence; your heart sinks as the engines wind down. In this instance, the pilot came on the intercom, "I have some bad news. There is a storm front in the west, exactly where we are headed. Denver is socked in and shut down. There are no alternatives. So we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food on board."

Everybody groaned. Some passengers became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants stood up in the aisle and took the mike. “We’re really sorry here, folks. We didn’t plan it this way, and we can’t do anything about it. We know that for some of you this is a big deal. You’re hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you have a medical condition and really need to eat. Some of you may not care. So I have an idea. We have a couple of empty bread baskets up here, and we’re going to pass them around. Everybody put something in the basket. I know some of you have brought a little snack along, just in case—peanut butter crackers, candy bars. Some of you have Roloids, Life Savers, chewing gum. And if you don’t happen to have anything edible, you have a business card or a picture of your kids or a bookmark. The thing is, I hope everybody puts something in the basket. And then we’ll reverse the process. We’ll pick the baskets up at the back of the plane and pass them around again and everybody can take out what he or she needs.”

“Well,” Palmer said, “what happened next was amazing. First, the complaining and griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags and briefcases. Some stood up and retrieved luggage from the overhead racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, Italian sausage, cheese, crackers, a bottle of wine [it was in the day you could actually do that]. Now people were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had transformed a group of anxious people focused on their need, deprivation, and scarcity into a gracious community, sharing and in the process creating an abundance of sorts.”

The flight eventually took off and landed, and as he stepped off the plane, Palmer found the flight attendant and said, “You know there’s a story in the Bible about what you did.” She said, “I know that story. That’s why I did it.”

And this is how God meets us more often than not. God enters our lives not in the power of a burning bush or the belly of a whale or in the calming of a storm or the suspension of the laws of nature to turn 5 loaves and 2 fish into enough for 5000. Rather, God enters into a deserted place filled with vulnerable people or in the cabin of a plane that is grounded for hours. The task for us is, in part, to be open to see the hand of God at work in the most common places and the most mundane moments. Indeed, John Lennon’s lyric from *Beautiful Boy* encapsulates this reality, “Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.” If we are so focused on God meeting us in the earth-shattering ways of the biblical miracles, we will miss the myriad ways that God meets us in each moment, which is nothing less than miraculous in itself.

What Parker Palmer’s story reminds us is the nature of God discloses itself in abundance and providing. Whether it is a deserted place in first century Palestine or the familiar confines of your home or a simple picnic at the park or in the feeding around the altar that has been paused for a time, but still resonates with us as so many moments are caught up in that feeding: Sunday after Sunday, at a baptism, while you were sick, at the death of a loved one, and on and on the images arise when we consider moving to the table of grace and being fed there again and again and again. The miracle of God continuing to meet us and feed us.

As we receive in this way, we are invited into a posture toward the world that is not driven by fear and scarcity. Rather, God invites us to engage the world from a place of trust and abundance. There is enough and enough for everyone. Of course, this disposition can be hard to adopt when things are difficult. Think of the hoarding that went on in places when the pandemic first began. Think also of those moments when we cling to whatever we have when we receive a troubling diagnosis, or lack certainty regarding what our next step in life should be, or are gripped by the anxiety of what will happen to our child. So many moments that move us to hold on as hard as we can. Moments, however, where God invites us to loosen our grip, let go, and trust, because God continues to be present and invites us into God's mercy and grace, God's compassion and abundance.

Indeed, what does the world look like when we act from this place of God's providing rather than the world's constant cry of scarcity? How do we see ourselves? How do we see others? What is our response to those around us, particularly those in need? Jesus said, "Give me what you have," and thousands were fed. Parker Palmer participated in a similar exercise and while many fewer than a thousand were impacted, the results were similar. And God was in both places. God was the miracle in the moment. God continually invites us to see and to participate in that presence guiding us in and through the challenges of life, so that we might open up more fully to the life God has given us, and in the process share this miracle with all whom we meet.