

*The 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*  
*The Rev. Elizabeth Meade*  
*Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

*Proper 13 - Year A*  
*August 3, 2014*  
**The Feeding of the 5000**

Today we heard one of the classic stories of the Bible: the Feeding of the 5000. We know it's an important story to focus on because it appears in all 4 of the Gospels. By contrast, the Sermon on the Mount only makes it into Matthew, and stories of Jesus' birth only make it into 2 of the Gospels. Anything that makes it into all four should be a clue to us that a story was too important for any of the Gospel writers to leave out; too important in the accounts of the life of Jesus and too important in the life of the church.

Many preachers try to explain "how" Jesus did it. Did he do something to the bread and the fishes that magically caused them to double in size each time someone pulled a hunk off? Or maybe the people, moved by Jesus' act of faith, rustled around under their cloaks and decided to share their own food with each other? Matthew doesn't tell us. And to spend too much time thinking about "how" Jesus managed to pull off such a miracle puts us in grave danger of missing the point of the story all together. So we're not going to go there today.

We aren't going there today because the Scriptures aren't written so that we can stand on the sidelines and marvel at magic tricks. They aren't written to teach us HOW to do magic tricks with loaves and fishes or to distract us into wondering HOW Jesus cured the lame and the blind. The point of reading Scripture is, instead, to encourage us and to empower us, we the children of God. The point of Scripture is to make us aware of God's presence with us and in the world, and to entice us into wanting to be a part of God's creative Spirit. The stories of Jesus' parables, and miracles, and, indeed, the stories of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection are NOT there for us to wonder at and to objectify. They were written to invite us into a new Way of Being; a new Way of being God's children in the world.

So let's get beyond the magic bread and look at the story. As Eric pointed out last week, it's a terrible time in the world right now. There were beheadings of Christians this week in Mosul, shootings on our streets and in our office buildings, children are still being held in detention centers along the MEXICO border, and wildfires and drought are besieging the west. Jesus' world was in pain, and so is ours. What was in need of healing in 1<sup>st</sup> century is in need of healing today.

So, how do we become healers of the world today? How can we be the hands and feet of Christ in a world that desperately needs some miracles today? Today's Gospel Suggests there are four steps necessary to make miracles.

**The FIRST STEP IS SABBATH.**

In the first line we hear, "*Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*" Why? Well, Jesus had had a tough month too: Teaching all those parables, increasing crowds of people wanting cures and healing, being laughed out of his hometown of Nazareth. And probably the biggie was hearing the news that his friend and cousin, John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Jesus needed a break, and he knew it, so he gets into a boat, pushes off into the Sea of Galilee, just hoping for some time apart.

So, the first lesson is this: If we are to do God's work, if we are to be imitators of Christ, if we are to heal a broken world – we all need SABBATH. Good rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day. Jesus took it. We all must be mindful of Sabbath. We cannot be the hands and feet of Christ in the world if we are fretful, fearful, exhausted people. It takes periodic rest to refresh, recharge, and regain the perspective we need in order to become the people God intends us to be.

The SECOND STEP is equally important. Listen again to the text:  
*"Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*

*When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd;  
and he had compassion for them."*

He had COMPASSION.

In order for miracles to happen, we must have compassion.

Jesus saw the crowds and had radical compassion. He cured their sick. The lesson here is that we must never get so wrapped up in our own problems or concerns that we withdraw from the world and refuse to provide help and support when others are in need. It is a message not just for us as individuals; it is a message to our collective parishes and to the church universal. For many parishes, Church business becomes the main thing. Or programs become the main thing. Or "growing the church" becomes the main thing. **It's not.** Being disciples of Jesus means radical hospitality, ingenious compassion, and grace-filled healing. No one is sent away. I love this prayer from the service of Compline which says, in part, "Tend the sick, Lord Christ, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering." This is our call as the church. No exceptions. Radical compassion is essential for miracle making.

The next point almost makes me laugh. The Disciples are so NAÏVE!

After all this curing and healing and compassion, the disciples are getting tired.

*The hour is now late, Jesus; why don't you send these crowds away so they can get dinner.*

(Perhaps it's the disciples who wanted dinner?!)

We may laugh, but Jesus doesn't. "You give them something to eat," Jesus says. Can you imagine the fear in the hearts of the disciples? What do you mean feed them, Jesus? All we have is 2 fish and 5 loaves.

And so Jesus shows them, again.

"Bring them here to me," he says. Bring them all here. Invite them in. Sit them down. Even the ugly ones, even the deformed, even those of different colors. Invite them all in. Make them all feel welcome.

STEP #3 is INCLUSIVITY. It's not inclusivity to "appear inclusive," inclusivity when it suits our needs. It's not inclusivity so we can, put a rainbow flag in our windows or on our website and call ourselves a "diverse" church. Jesus' inclusivity points us to a more radical inclusivity. INCLUSIVITY simply because we are children of God,

And because we BELIEVE that ALL people are beloved children of God.

And that takes faith, my friends. FAITH with a capital "F"

Which brings me to the final step in the making of miracles.

STEP #4 is FAITH. Think of the faith it took Jesus to do this next part:

*"Then Jesus TOOK the five loaves and two fish, and he LOOKED up to heaven, and BLESSED and BROKE the loaves, and GAVE them to his disciples."* Sounds a lot like Eucharist to me. Does it to you?

Let me tell you a story. It's a true story. It is the story of the parish where I served as deacon. It is the story of two friends of mine. These two Guys, Matt and Joe watched about 6 years ago as the banks collapsed, the markets tanked, and unemployment went into the stratosphere. They came to Fr. Bill and me and said, we want to feed people. We want to offer the community a free dinner once a month, no strings attached. Can we use the building one Sunday night a month to do that?" We said, "Sure," and "Two Guys and Spaghetti" was born. And every month, to this day, they transform the Parish Hall of SCEC into an Italian Restaurant. Pictures of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin appear on the walls, red checked tablecloths cover the tables, and you'll hear Pavarotti or Bocelli playing in the background. They make marinara sauce from Joe's grandmother's recipes and Matt's grandmother's meatballs. Guests are seated by a hostess and introduced to their server for the evening. (Servers are parishioners in white shirts, red bandanas, and black slacks.) And soon word on the street was that this funky little church up the street was offering a free meal with no strings attached. No Bible studies, no bait and switch, no preaching – just a really good restaurant caliber meal.

And People came! And Other churches came! And now, six years later, other groups have emulated this odd little model of no strings attached, restaurant caliber free dinners offered to the community. We never charge. We have a “Quiet Can” that sits at the “hostess desk.” Somehow, expenses are always covered.

It may be tight some months but the can always comes through – and there are always leftovers. Now, it is estimated that over 1000 people in the Fox Valley enjoy a free, restaurant caliber meal every month.

We are not the 5000 that the Gospel talks about today – not yet.

But we’re trying.

So I offer you that story as a 21<sup>st</sup> century example of what constitutes a miracle, and a reminder of the lessons this Gospel strives to write upon our hearts. It is not about magic loaves plumping themselves up into something other than what they were. It is not about HOW to do it.

It’s about RESTING in God’s loving arms and having the FAITH to try something that’s never been tried before. So remember the points:

Sabbath.

Compassion.

Inclusivity.

And FAITH.

For with these things, we can accomplish miracles, in Jesus’ name. Amen.