

Desperation and Hope - The Life of Faith

Pentecost 9B July 25, 2024

Gospel Reading: John 6:1-21 - The Feeding of the 5000

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Today our gospel reading is what the gospel writer John calls a “sign.” After Jesus has healed many people, a large crowd has followed him to the far side of Sea of Galilee, a distance from any town as the day draws on. Jesus asks Philip – to test him we’re told – “where are we to buy bread for these people?”

Philip, pipes up, “Six months wages wouldn’t buy enough for this many people.” Andrew, sounding a little sheepish says, “there’s a boy here with 5 barley loaves and some fish,” but then he catches himself and adds “but what’s that for so many?”

But, as John tells us, Jesus simply took the loaves and fish, gave thanks to God and tells the disciples to distribute it. When they go to gather up what’s left, there’s enough for 12 baskets full. And the people all say, “this is indeed the Messiah, the Chosen One, whom it was prophesied would come.”

The feeding of the 5000. John calls this a sign; a miracle, we say. But that may be precisely where the problem for us arises. Long ago, perhaps, such reports of miracles gave rise to faith. But in an age where miracles don’t seem to occur, we aren’t sure what to make of such stories from the bible?

Well, like most things, I guess it depends on what you’re looking for, and that kind of looking depends on what you are able to see.

I remember how as a child when I heard this story of the feeding of the 5000, I could only understand it in a simple, rudimentary way: as a story showing that Jesus could do amazing stuff; that he could turn a little into a lot; that he could feed a whole bunch of hungry people.

A bit later, in my teenage years, at a time when I didn’t really have a lot of experience in life yet, but was old enough to start doubting most of what I’d been taught, I wasn’t sure what to make of such stories. Although I couldn’t name a date that it happened, I guess I stopped believing in miracles. They were hard to reconcile with the rest of what I had been learning— at school and, what I’d learned in life to that point. By then I had prayed for things to happen that never did; I’d hoped for a miracle or two, but they never seemed to pan out.

Still some time later, I suppose in my college years, with all the book learning and new and deeper, rational explanations of things that were part of my education I learned to look for alternative ways of explaining things: rational ways. There were different ways of reading stories, especially bible stories, from the way I had learned as a child.

Somewhere I heard that this wasn't really a miracle, but just Jesus as a good leader and example, by taking that little bit of food, motivated the people to share their food with each other. It wasn't a supernatural event, just a good social one.

In seminary I learned some sophisticated theological techniques to get at the "real" meaning of such bible stories. By learning about the ancient world and the genre of the passage, placing it in the context of the book it appeared in and the setting of church history, the historical-critical method could "explain" these stories. Even though the bible passage itself might only be a few lines— and after a while you didn't even need to bother with it much — you could write a long paper about what the scholars said with lots of footnotes.

But then, some years later, after learning a bit more from life than from books, after some heartaches and mistakes and some experiences with loss and grief, the problem was that the theological explaining often seemed more like explaining away and all the critical methodology didn't help with the sort of hollow feeling, the longing — the hunger, I suppose you could call it — that I still felt inside.

Maybe it was the same in Jesus' time. Not only would the crowds give Jesus no peace, following him wherever he went, but as suppertime drew near they still refused to go home, sticking to Jesus with equal measures of desperation and hope. I guess it's the same for me; maybe for you, too.

Desperation and hope. The life is comprised of both. Desperation, because we live in a world colored by fear and greed, violence and disappointment. Hope, because we long for life as abundant as it is new.

At the age I am now I may not really understand things any better but I do recognize what a miracle it would take and what a miracle it would truly be for people — for me — to share what I have with others who are hungry. In fact in churches like this one, I've seen it happen.

Now, when I look at this story in light of what I've learned about the world, about life, about myself — and maybe more importantly — because of what I still don't understand about the world, life and myself, it seems I'm back where I started, believing:

- that Jesus can do amazing stuff
- that Jesus can turn a little into a lot
- and that Jesus can feed a whole lot of people when they gather in faith

I believe in miracles. Oh, maybe not quite as easily as I once did as a child, but now because I know that I need them. And because I've learned that faith in God is less apt to come *from* miracles than miracles *from faith* in God. I guess it's a different kind of seeing, where all sorts of things you took for granted now show themselves for what they really are.

– the story of Jesus – from beginning to end – is the story of what life looks like when instead of living in fear of scarcity, we live abundantly.

— the story of Jesus — from beginning to end — is the story of God’s miraculous, nourishing, amazingly abundant love.

Desperation and hope. The life of faith is always made up of these two. Jesus calls us to bring these two things – and everything else that we have and are – to him, for he will not disappoint.]

It may be a little short on the side of sophisticated theological explanations or proofs, but I believe it’s true — and that itself a miracle.

We are now invited to a meal – just a bit of bread, a bit of wine – but miracle of miracles, it can touch our deepest hunger.