

Proper 12, Year B, 2009

John 6: 1-21

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The miraculous feeding of the multitudes story in John's Gospel is certainly familiar to most of us. It happens to be the only one of the Jesus miracle stories told in all four gospels. It was obviously a popular story in the early church and, not surprisingly, there were several different versions of it in the oral tradition. Because there were multiple versions, both Mark and Matthew ended up telling the story twice, with each telling reflecting different versions, as if there were two different events. The bottom line is that this story was well known, accepted without question and was most significant in the early proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.

You have to ask why this story was of such great interest, and why it generated more excitement than changing water into wine or walking on water, which is also a part of today's gospel reading. The only answer that makes sense is that this feeding story carried tremendous meaning for those who heard it. It told them something about Jesus that comforted and reassured them. The story helped them to feel that they belonged in the family of God.

How can this be? On the surface level, perhaps even the primary level, the story is about feeding hungry people. It is a magnificent story about Jesus cutting through the whining self-centeredness of his assistants, at least as the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story, to put the needs of common people first. It is a story of pragmatic caring, of tender and loving concern for those who had gone out of their way to come out to hear Jesus speak. In the rush to be with Jesus, they came unprepared. Jesus took care of them. The message they heard is, "I may not be an important person, but I'm important to Jesus because Jesus cares about common people like me."

But soon, though, among the faithful, among the brotherhood and sisterhood of believers, this story took on another layer of meaning, a layer wrapped around, if you will, this core that I call the core of the "Caring Jesus," and that layer is the layer called all-sufficient grace. Let me define "grace" this way: grace is the expression of caring; it is the product of God's caring for us because he made us and he loves us. I've often said that grace is God's love, in Christ, acted out, a tangible expression of divine love. Today's gospel story conveys a meaning that builds on that understanding of grace, and it tells us that God's grace, through the risen Christ, is sufficient for all humanity. There is no need for anyone or any church to try to corner the market.

It is so easy for us to become possessive of God's grace. I think it is human nature to grab and hold God's love as if others could take it from us. Don't forget that this story was a story of hunger and nourishment, and when you are hungry for anything, it is understandable that you want to hoard. But this miraculous feeding story tells us that hoarding is not necessary when it comes to the things of God. In the story, not only were five thousand fed on five loaves of bread and two fish, but they also needed carryout boxes for the leftovers. The message is that God's

love, in Christ is more than abundant. It is sufficient for the needs of all humanity and it is inclusive. That abundant and all-sufficient grace that invites us to spiritually break bread with Jesus, to live nourished by his Body and Blood, brings us into a fellowship in which artificial barriers of gender and race, of political philosophy, of wealth or any other divider dissolve, and we are truly one in Christ Jesus.

And this is the way that it should be. With God's grace sufficient for all humanity, we do not have to live in competition; we do not have to erect artificial boundaries based on ethnicity or any other thing. Life in Christ is not about being right. It is not about who best interprets the Holy Scripture, or who can best define what is moral. It is certainly not about superiority of Western culture to the cultures of the third world or vice versa, a division that is tearing us apart today. In other words, in Christ judgment of our brothers and sisters is just not appropriate because in Christ we are all broken but in him we are all made whole.

If our church and if our world needs to hear anything from the gospel reading this morning, it is this. If the Lord accepts us just as we are, if the Lord loves us equally and showers all of humanity with his grace, then it is not our job to fault our brother or sister. Our job is to listen for what God wants of us, to follow and obey by serving our neighbor as Christ does us. *Amen.*