**Proper 13, Year A**

August 3, 2014

Matthew 14:13-21

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

It starts getting late, and the disciples, knowing that the crowd listening to Jesus would be getting hungry, approach Jesus and ask him to dismiss the people to go into the villages to buy food for themselves.

Jesus responds *positively* to the disciples’ request. They have done **well** to consider the hunger of the crowd! But Jesus has a different idea about how to *accomplish* the goal of filling the bellies of the people – and it doesn’t involve sending the crowd away.

“*You* give them something to eat,” he tells them. “I’m not going to send them to McDonald’s; we’re going to have a picnic right here with what **you’ve** got.” Incredulous, they respond to Jesus, “But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish!” And there are 5000 families!

Yet Jesus is undeterred. Whereas the *disciples* see only their **limited** resources, *Jesus* sees ***un***limited possibility. “Bring me what you have,” he tells them. And so the disciples bring to Jesus the five loaves and two fish, and taking them, he looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples, and the disciples give them to the crowds. “And all ate and were filled: and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”

*You* give them something to eat. In the original Greek, it is clear that Jesus emphasizes “YOU”. Although it may *seem* to us that **Jesus** is the one acting here, he does not do so without the disciples’ efforts. It is the disciples who mention to Jesus the hunger of the crowd. It is the disciples who bring what little resources they have—5 loaves and 2 fish—to Jesus. It is the disciples who begin the distribution in faith – *not knowing the end result of their obedience,* a part of them likely feeling foolish, thinking that this is a pointless endeavor. It is the disciples who distribute the bread to everyone – no small task among 5000 families! And it is the disciples who collect twelve baskets of leftovers. It **is** a miracle of our Lord, to be sure; but as one commentator states, “the disciples are indispensable—from the diagnosis of the need to the gathering up of the leftovers.” (Brueggemann *et al*, *Texts for Preaching, Year A*, WJK, p.432)

We Christians rightly attribute all good things to God, but we often fail to recognize that God intends that *we* play an integral part in the *accomplishment* of those good things. Jesus could have saved the disciples all that work of distributing bread to 5000 families if he had just multiplied the loaves inside the stomachs of the people. But that is *not* what he does. The miracle requires *human* involvement. And yet how often do we think that a “miracle” is something that **God** does, and *work* is something that we humans do? Someone is cured of cancer through the God-given talents of researchers and physicians; is that any ***less*** a miracle than if God were to cure that person *without* the physicians? We send food to areas of Africa suffering catastrophic famine. Is not that food a miracle to those starving people? And yet mention the word “miracle” to the average Christian, and most will say that it is something **God** does *without* human involvement.

It is easy to see how we have gotten ourselves into this fix. Since the time of Thomas Cranmer, we Anglicans have been products of a very Calvinistic theology. “There is no health in us,” the 1928 Prayer Book said. And if there is no health in us, then no *good* can **possibly** come from us. If God wants a miracle, God had better do it *without* us sinful humans.

And yet, here is Jesus saying, “**You** give them something to eat.”

Martin Luther, who was suspicious of anything that even *hinted* at “works righteousness”, who saw **everything** as coming from the grace of God, wrote this: “If God did not *bless*, not one hair, not a solitary wisp of straw, would grow; … there would be an end of everything. *At the same time* God wants me to take this stand: I would have nothing whatever if ***I*** did not plow and sow. God does not want to have success come without work… He does not want me to sit at home, to loaf, to commit matters to God, and to wait till a fried chicken flies into my mouth.”

We are called to be co-workers, co-creators with Christ! “*You* give them something to eat”—and as the disciples offer to Jesus their meager resources, Jesus blesses them and *in the process* of their being distributed by the disciples they are multiplied beyond imagination! It is, in essence, the story of what happens when we take the Eucharist into our lives and back out into the world. Because we have become joined to Jesus by partaking of his life, we, too – like Jesus – are to offer ourselves as bread broken and given to others.

All too often, however, if you are like me, we *withhold* our gifts and expect God to do miracles **without** us. Perhaps we withhold offering what we *have* because what we have seems so insignificant. We are discouraged by the larger “realities”. What good are only five loaves and two fish among five thousand families? What good are my small talents, my meager tithe? We focus on the “only”: we “only” have 5 loaves and two fish; we “only” have a $40,000 annual income; we can “only” give so much of our time. And yet we are called to trust the power of God to address the realities of human need with what we have. Doing what we can with what we have been given gives God the opportunity to transform and multiply our meager efforts.

“*You* give them something to eat.”

What an exciting and awesome privilege, that we are called to be co-creators with God, to be ministers of God’s grace in our world! If only we could see our work in the Church, in our families, in the world *in that light*, perhaps our attitude – our perspective – would be transformed, and we might find new meaning, purpose, and enthusiasm for life. It may be that we would no longer rush to finish our work so that we would *live*, but rather we might begin to *live* **in** and **through** our work. Author and Episcopalian Madeline L’Engle said that she did not *work* so much as become *a servant of the work*. “The work does *me*,” L’Engle wrote; “***I*** don’t do the work.”

This gives a whole new perspective on our Gospel story! We have been focusing on the disciples as *participants* in **God’s** work, and that is true; but the *inverse* is **equally** true: the disciples are also the *recipients* of the work! The disciples are not simply *doing* the work; the work is also doing **them** – effecting a change within them, since the Holy Spirit is **in** the work! **They** are fed not so much in *eating* the bread as in *distributing* it. It is *in the process of distributing the bread* that the miracle occurs, after all! The crowds benefit from eating the bread, to be sure; but the *disciples* are perhaps changed even more as they **distribute** that bread and collect the leftovers.

Fr. Stuart Hoke, a priest friend when I was in the Diocese of Northwest Texas, once excitedly asked me: “Guess what I get to do?!” He was so *thrilled* that I thought he had won a trip to Bermuda, or that the diocese was sending him to London for the installation of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. “I give up,” I finally said. “What do you get to do?” “I get to lead a retreat for the clergy of the Diocese of Massachusetts!” “Get” to lead a retreat for the clergy of the Diocese of Massachusetts? What an incredible amount of hard work that was going to be! And yet Stuart saw that not only would he be involved in doing God’s work, but God’s work would also be “doing” him. Said in another way, the Holy Spirit working **in** the work would bless *him* as he **participated** in the work.

I guess every Rector dreams of the day when one parishioner comes up to another and says, “Guess what I get to do? I get to serve on the Altar Guild!” or “I get to serve on the Vestry!” or “I get to teach Sunday School!” or “I get to tithe!” You laugh, but as much work as it must have been for the Disciples to distribute bread to 5000 families, would you not have given your eye teeth to do it that day? Be a part of the miracle? We are fed *as* we feed others; the work does us as we do the work.

My friends, it is no different from feeding the hungry multitude amongst us, through the vehicle of Loaves and Fishes Ministries or Mercy Today. *We* become part of the miracle. We are fed as we feed others; the work does us as we do the work.

My friends, it is no different with teaching Sunday School, or volunteering to help with a reception after a funeral. In feeding young children the stories of Jesus or in feeding grieving families after a funeral, we are **part** of the miracle. **We** are fed *as* we feed others; the work *does us* as we do the work.

What is it that you and I get to do with God this week? AMEN