

Sermon: Pentecost Proper 13 “A”

July 31, 2011

Texts: Matthew 14:13-21

Theme: God’s Work. Our Hands.

Imagine that you just received the news that your cousin was killed. You and he had not been very close. You didn’t grow up together, but your family history bonded you with him and you had met him at a very pivotal moment in your life. I expect that would shake you up a bit, as it would for me. You might need some time to yourself or some time to pray about what you just learned.

If you can imagine that, then you begin to sense the context of our reading today from Matthew 14, the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. One of Jesus’ amazing miracles, it comes on the heels of this tragic news that Jesus heard about John the Baptist. Jesus needed some time to himself and so he drew away from everyone else. It is very understandable.

What is also understandable is that a crowd followed Jesus into that deserted place where he sought solitude. The people had heard of Jesus’ healing power and they had learned of his unique teachings. He was someone to see, someone to seek out and so they went after him, surely not realizing what he was dealing with himself.

When Jesus saw the crowd, what happened? Very simply...he had compassion for them. He saw their need. He saw their longing. And he could do nothing less than respond to it, even with all that was going on for him. So for a while he set aside his need and tended to theirs. He cured their sick, the text tells us. At this point, the story hasn’t told us how large this crowd was. We get that a few verses later when we learn there were 5000 men, plus women and children. That’s a lot of people... a lot of need.

It must have been a long day of tending to people so that by the end of it all it is time for a meal. The disciples, perhaps sensing that the crowds would not leave Jesus’ presence on their own, encouraged him to send them away so that they could get a meal back in the villages. But Jesus had other thoughts about the crowd and how to feed them. “They don’t need to go away. You feed them,” he said. I’m sure that’s not what the disciples had in mind, especially since the only food they seemed to have on hand was five loaves of bread and two fish. How would this be possible, short of a really good deal at a local market?



It seems that Jesus’ desire was to have the disciples participate in the miracle that was about to happen. Certainly Jesus could have fed this crowd without their help. The God who fashioned all of creation has that kind of power. So it is not that Jesus was powerless to do it without them. Rather, it is that Jesus was purposeful in involving them.

At our house, as in many others, we ask the kids to do some of the chores for the family. Not every night, but some nights we may ask one of the kids to set the table for dinner. Of course, we don’t ask them

because Warren or I can't do it without them, but because we want them to learn how to be a part of the family and to learn about caring for the tasks that go into being the family.

In a much deeper sense, Jesus called on the disciples to participate in the work of the family of God, not because he needed them, but because he wanted them to be a part of it and to learn what it means to be in God's family.

And so the disciples brought to Jesus what they had and through his transformational power, through the breaking of the bread and the blessing, he took what seemed like a little and made it into an abundance for everyone. There were even leftovers.

What was the result of that miracle? Yes, people were fed and filled, but I wonder if the crowds even knew what had just happened. If you are in a crowd of 5000 men plus women and children, which probably added another 10,000-15,000, you probably wouldn't have seen what this one man, Jesus, had done. All you would know is that you had been fed. But the disciples knew, didn't they? They were invited to participate and they were the ones who would have witnessed the miracle. I think the way Jesus performed this miracle was more for them than for the crowds. Yes, Jesus had compassion for the crowds and wanted to provide for them, but he used this opportunity to teach something important to his followers: they were to be a part of God's work in the world.

What happens to us when we are willing to participate in God's work? What happens to us when we feed those in need? What happens to us when we take what we have and hand it over to God's purposes? I believe we witness God's miracles.

Each week in worship we pray together for people in need. We take our concerns to God, much like the disciples who appealed to Jesus to send the crowds to get food. But if this miracle story is to teach us something then perhaps Jesus' answer to our prayers might sound something like this, "I've provided you with food, distribute it. I've provided you with money, donate some. I've provided you with time and abilities, volunteer them." (Pastor Brian Stoffregan, Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks.com.)

What is our role in God's miracles? So often we want God to rush in and put an end to human need and suffering. I understand that. I pray for those kinds of things all of the time. And every time there is another disaster or tragedy, I want God to fix it all quickly. But what is my role and your role and our role in God's work? I think our ELCA has it right: *God's Work. Our Hands.*



The feeding of the 5000 is a powerful miracle that demonstrates the amazing and deep compassion that God has for his people in need. Jesus responded generously and met the needs before him. At the same time, Jesus did it in such a way that we find our calling to join in his miracles even today. We can offer what we have, though it may seem insufficient to us, and then watch what he does with it to miraculous and profound ends, blessing us and crowds of others.

I want to end today by showing you an example of how we, through our ELCA, are doing just that:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/ELCAVideo#p/c/4/uZ6LbtLRonw>