

Where Is The Fifth Loaf?

4 – Life's a Miracle – Miracles in John's Gospel

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 68:1-8

John 6:1-15

March 7, 2010

Third Sunday in Lent

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

It is a beautiful early mosaic set into the floor, a portrayal in stone of a basket containing four loaves and two fish. It is found in the Church at Tabga along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee known as the Church of the Multiplication. Near the mountains upon which Jesus taught the crowds, and then on more than one occasion, fed them with seemingly inadequate resources. The current church at Tabga is more recent, but this mosaic and the rock upon which it is built go back to that church of the early centuries of Christianity.

Hence you wonder at the math of the mosaic? Four loaves? Had they forgotten so soon the story? Why only four loaves, when all the Gospels say there were five? Where is the fifth? A sort of visual parable is before us in that church. For, you see, the fifth loaf is there, just above the ancient mosaic, there on the stone altar table where Jesus is presented in the communion bread each time the meal is celebrated. Strange math indeed, but math that leads to life, fullness, completeness, joy, abundance, no matter what!

You may have heard the old saying, said mostly of Episcopalians, but not too far off if applied to Presbyterians; where there are four Episcopalians, there is always a fifth! Here is the truth of this miracle. Where there are four loaves and Jesus, there is always enough, enough for all. Four loaves plus Jesus equals five. Five loaves and two fish plus Jesus feeds 5000 as each of the Gospel accounts tell us. Or put it like this: No N-O Jesus, No N-O life. Know K-N-O-W Jesus, K-N-O-W life! That is the whole point.

You already know that John in his gospel is lean, sparing, and deliberate in his use of Jesus' Miracle Stories. John records only seven miracles, set forth in a deliberate and progressively more dramatic, and increasingly conflictual way - over who Jesus is and what Jesus does. John moves us from the first nice little changing of water to wine at Cana to the final dramatic raising of Lazarus from the Dead at Bethany. Each miracle is spoken of as a sign pointing beyond itself to something greater, pointing to the very nature of Jesus. The real miracle of life, found where Jesus is recognized.

This miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is the only one found in all four gospels. Where John is generally off on his own trajectory, and records miracles such as these, water to wine at Cana and Lazarus to life at Bethany and the one we looked at last week, the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethzatha in Jerusalem, miracles not found in the other three gospels; this miracle of the bread and fish feeding the multitudes is alone

in all four Gospel accounts. John must think it is pretty important. The early church must think it is pretty important.

John dates this as taking place, “near the Passover, the festival of the Jews,” thereby connecting the memory of that time of great deliverance of Israel from Egypt with what Jesus is about to do. It is a lesson we are to remember every time we sit at the Lord’s Table. The lesson is this: where Jesus is, there is enough for all in abundance.

Living in a nation where food is available in abundance, we tend to forget the connection of food with faith. In the arid Middle East, food remains uncertain. Oh sure Galilee is a lush, green, agriculturally rich part of the country. But annual rainfall is unpredictable, and without rain, there is no food. One does not dare take food for granted in the Middle East.

Living in Birmingham where, near our house, we can choose to go to any one of six large well-stocked grocery stores within a few blocks of each other; we forget the connection of food and faith. We take our food for granted. The Jews did not. They looked to God for their food, which is why they always offered thanks before eating. Says the Psalmist, “The eyes of all look to Thee, and Thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfieth the desire of every living thing.”ⁱ

Throughout the Old Testament God is portrayed as the provider of food in abundance. When the Israelites flee Egypt and wander in the arid lifeless desert forty years, God provides daily food, manna on weekdays and quail on Sabbath. When the Prophet Elisha is moving about through Israel, healing and prophesying, a man comes from Baal-shalishah, bringing the prophet twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain. Elisha tells him, take it and feed a hundred people. The man asks how? What he has is enough only for a small dinner party, not for a group of 100. Elisha says, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’”ⁱⁱ The man does, the people do, and there are leftovers.

I

Jesus has all this in mind when, seeing the vast multitude coming to him on the mountain he asks Philip, “Where are we going to buy food for these people to eat?” Philip reacts with glass-half-empty common sense. “Impossible. Cannot do it. No way to feed this many even if someone gives up half a year’s salary to do so.” John cues us to the fact that, as John presents it, Jesus is omniscient, sees all, knows all, and knows who he is and what he is going to do. “Jesus said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.”

Philip represents the pragmatic skeptic counting heads, and counting costs, and coming up short, recognizing the utter natural impossibility. Philip portrays the attitude of all too many of us when we consider the seeming impossibility of the Church’s ministry and mission. We cannot do it! Not on our own. But with Jesus... “All things are possible to the one who believes,” Jesus told a despairing father.

II

Andrew represents one who sees a slight possibility. Andrew brings forth this young boy. The boy has no name, no known accomplishments, and no identity. He is no great powerful leader of the Galilee. A mere child. Just a lad. What could one expect from such a lad? John's is the only gospel to bring into view this person from whom the five loaves and two fish come, Andrew says, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Andrew is hopeful, but not optimistic.

This story has suffered two extremes of interpretation. First, the magical extreme - where a magical zap is sent forth and suddenly there is this immense banquet before us. Jesus the Magician. Second, the moralist extreme - a sweetly reasonable approach. According to this line of interpretation, the miracle is this boy's offering his lunch up to Jesus and Jesus' focus on the boy's generosity in sharing his bread shames the crowd to likewise reach down into their bags and bring forth their own sandwiches they have kept hidden. Jesus the Moralist. Is Jesus either a magician or a moralist?

III

John will not let us get by with either extreme. I do not know how it happens. But the miracle involves Jesus' very presence, transforming the inadequate material resources that are being offered. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has noted, "The divine miracle requires the thoroughly inadequate human contribution." As St. Augustine says, "We without God cannot; God without us will not."

But where Jesus is among us, God incarnate, in the flesh, his spirit intermingling with our spirit, miracles happen. He instructs the disciples to get all the people seated, John bringing up the detail that it is springtime, "there was a great deal of grass in the place." I love John's attention to such seemingly insignificant details. John wants us to feel the human emotion. Here is a wonderful place for a picnic during Passover season. Here is a God who cares.

Then comes the familiar giving of thanks. Jesus takes the loaves and gives thanks, and then he distributes them to those who are seated, likewise the fish, and this detail, "as much as they wanted." Then another detail, "when they were satisfied." None of the crowd has to plead with Jesus, "Please sir, may I have some more?" They eat to their heart's content, all they want, all they need. Still, there is more. So Jesus commands the disciples, "now gather up the leftovers, that," as John uniquely emphasizes, nothing may be lost." There is to be enough for all that day. There is to be enough for all God's children of every day. "So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets." Symbolically, these represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

During my sabbatical I spent all Saturday night on Pentecost Eve until early Sunday morning in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Throughout the night, I took part in several services of varied Eastern Orthodox Churches. Especially

moving was the Pentecost liturgy of the Russian Orthodox. About a hundred Russian pilgrims had traveled from Moscow by bus to be in Jerusalem for this celebration of the birth of the Church.

After the elaborate Eucharistic service, and the serving of communion to the faithful, I noticed large baskets of bread set out near the exits, and all the worshippers took a big piece of bread on their way out. I did, too.

It happens that only a few worshippers actually take communion in a Russian Orthodox service, for fear of being found unworthy to receive, and non-Orthodox, such as Presbyterians, are not allowed to receive communion at all. Now I do have a problem with that. But on the other hand, everyone is invited to partake of the leftovers. At least we are offered the leftover bread! Good, bad and ugly are invited to come and take a big hunk of the leftover bread. Denny Read used to urge the F2:19 worshippers, "Take a big piece, a generous portion, as generous as the generosity of God who offers it." From what has been offered by Jesus among us, bread and fish that are blessed by him - All are fed. All are satisfied. And there is plenty leftover, that none go wanting.

This feeding miracle followed by Jesus' discourse the next day saying, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This is the closest John gets to the actual story of the Last Supper. Interestingly in John, five whole chapters give the dialogue and actions at that Last Supper in Jerusalem. Yet there is no communion enactment. No Jesus' breaking the bread and saying, "This is my body, broken for you." No Jesus' pouring the cup and saying, "This is my blood, shed for you." We do not find that in John. Instead, we find this miraculous feeding of the 5000 followed by this "I am the bread of life" discourse. This is John's way.

John wants us to grasp the connection. A meal feeds hungry people where Jesus is recognized. The crowds are excited because of the bread. But Jesus wants them to be excited because of him. To experience the food that is beyond the bread, the food that is Jesus himself.

The Protestant Reformers were insistent on clearing up the hocus pocus attitude of the church in the 16th Century, that the Eucharist was a magic trick whereby bread is physically and chemically changed to flesh, and wine is physically and chemically changed to blood. No, they said, these material elements of bread and wine are rather signs and symbols pointing to something greater than themselves. Pointing to Jesus.

This is the connection Jesus always wants us to make. When we recognize him among us, in our communion meals, in our ordinary meals, yes our physical needs will be met. But more, all our needs will be met; body, mind, and spirit. Our divided parts will be linked. We will be whole. We will be satisfied. And there will be enough for all. "That nothing may be lost."

Where is the fifth loaf? Look to Jesus. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, founder of the Moravians said,

“Our method of proclaiming salvation is this:
 To point out to every heart the loving Lamb, who died for us,
 And although He was the Son of God, offered Himself for our sins...
 To name no virtue except in Him, and from Him and on His account,
 To preach no commandment except faith in Him;
 No other justification but that He atoned for us;
 No other sanctification but the privilege to sin no more;
 No other happiness but to be near Him, to think of Him and do His pleasure;
 No other self denial but to be deprived of Him and His blessings;
 No other calamity but to displease Him; no other life but in Him.”

Such is the miracle. This feeding of the 5000, this the fourth of his signs.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”ⁱⁱⁱ Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 145:4, 5

ⁱⁱ 2 Kings 4:42-44.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 20:30-31.