

“Loaves and Fishes” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey 9/14/08  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

TEXT: 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.

RIGHT AFTER OUR STORY TODAY, things quiet down. Jesus sends the disciples off in a boat to cross the lake ahead of him; he goes back to dismiss the crowds, making sure they start home safely. Then he resumes what he had set out to do earlier that day, he goes off by himself to pray. The meadow remains, forever graced by the activity of the day, forever home to a miracle.

That week had started out quite differently. Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, had a birthday, and he celebrated with a great decadent banquet. Mesmerized by the dancing of his wife’s daughter, he promised her anything she wanted, and on her mother’s behalf, she demanded the head of John the Baptist. In the swirl of veils, in the glint of an eye, in less time that it takes for the mutton carcass to be removed from the table, John was gone. A roaring lion, a cousin, a wild and holy man, was put to an ugly, abrupt death. It was a cheap and tawdry thing, as violent death sometimes is. At the end the bloody head was handed to the girl. She held it I suppose, though it’s hard to picture.

It pretty much broke up the party. The gold linen cloths were rumped, crumpled, pushed back willy-nilly exposing the rough boards underneath. Meaty hands grabbed on and pressed, heaving overfed bodies to their feet. The guests pushed out the door with the grisly news on their silly, shameless lips. It didn’t take long to reach Jesus.

“Now when Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew.” Surely he wanted to grieve. But surely, he also went to ponder his own vulnerability. Herod distrusted Jesus as well, as did both Roman and Jewish authorities. John’s death doubtless reminded him all too viscerally of the death that almost certainly awaited him.

I think it brought him up short. Not only had he lost a relative and friend, He suddenly realized an urgency. How long before Herod trapped him? He had disciples to equip, an new understanding of law and grace and justice to impart, organization and partnerships and tools and determination to instill. He must have confronted the daunting magnitude of the cultural and political dangers and the arbitrary callousness of those in power. He may have panicked; He certainly shuddered.

So he sought to withdraw -- Even as many of us seek to withdraw when we are afraid or overwhelmed or deeply hurt or profoundly misunderstood or injured.

But it was not to be. The crowds followed him, And like so many times before and after, Jesus put aside grief, overcame weariness and preoccupation, to stretch himself to meet the people's needs. Every Gospel version agrees: Jesus was drawn to the crowds by his compassion.

And in his response, there were miracles—a miracle for the disciples, as they experienced their own power; and a miracle for the crowds, whose spiritual and physical hunger got fed and a miracle for Jesus, as he discovered, again, the transformative power, even for him, of community and of service.

Jesus responded to the crowds and healed the sick. Later, as stomachs began to grumble, Jesus actualized his resolve to make sure his disciples were learning how to carry on his ministry. Jesus said, "Here you take it for a while, you give them something to eat. You provide the potluck!"

Now I know that in churches like ours, potlucks are considered a "sacrament" right along with baptism and communion! And I know that, despite my recurring anxiety, we always have enough. But this, well this was a potluck disaster for the disciples. There was not a Bell Market or a Noe Valley Deli for many miles.

The disciples faltered right there where the rubber is supposed to hit the road. "Too little resources, Lord." "Our supplies are too low." "We are scrapping the bottom of the barrel." "We are too few." "We don't have enough." "We can't do it."

Are your own antennae twitching just now? Are you sitting forward a little on your chairs as you experience that familiar feeling of trying to recruit Sunday School teachers or deacons or greeters. Are you reliving trying to stretch 8 pages of ideas to meet the minimum requirement of a 12-15 page paper. Can you revive the November angst about whether current income can cover staff and building or home and family expenses? How often are we sucked in by the feeling of "not enough"? Not enough money. Not enough time. Not enough people. Not enough space. Not enough.

I am no different. These days, I often feel more like one of those disciples, stuck in the difficult situation of trying to respond to an overwhelming need with few provisions. My to-do list looks like 5,000 hungry people, But it is just at such moments of emotional scarcity that I like remembering this story of Jesus feeding 5,000. It reminds me of a fundamental truth—that my ministry pivots not on how much I have or what I can give, but rather on how much I can trust in my own resources, and how much God gives by multiplying what I have. And as Jesus says, it is true for every one of us.

Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves....the number of those who ate was about five thousand men, plus women and children.

Was it a miracle?

The problem with miracles is that we tend to get mesmerized by them, focusing on God's responsibility and forgetting our own. Miracles let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, do it all. We do not have what it takes, after all. What we have to offer is not enough to make any difference at all, so we hold back and wait for a miracle, looking after our own needs and looking for God to help those who cannot help themselves.

Many think that this event was simply a crowd being touched by the way the disciples handed over all they had, touched by Jesus simple confidence that it would be enough, touched enough to pull out the food hidden in their own pockets or up their sleeves -- a bit of lamb wrapped in a grape leaf, a few raisins, a chunk of bread grabbed from breakfast – touched enough to put some in the basket even as they took some out. Would that make this event less of a miracle – or more of a miracle?

The real miracle is that a group of human beings become family. The disciples gathered them together in small groups, creating a series of intimate circles. They overcome their own fear of going hungry, they gave up their need to protect themselves, they trusted in a power greater than themselves, and everyone joined in a grand potluck picnic. Is it not a miracle when a whole bunch of people move from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty? From a place of fear and suspicion to a place of trust and wholeness?

It may not have been a miracle from above, but certainly it was a miracle from within.

Sitting in the crowd, waiting for God to act, we too can hang on to our own little loaves of bread, our own imaginations, our own gifts and resources, our own isolation. Transforming the crowd to community, creating space that feels like home, reaching out to do what we can, we can stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.

Jesus could have chosen a ministry based in raw power, the elaborate indulgent dinner parties with the colossal waste of food and a prophet's needless blood. Instead he chose a ministry of empowerment and healing, a ministry creating sacred space wherever he went, reminding the people that they had God, and they had each other. His idea of home was a simple meal rather than an orgy of dish after dish; a sharing in intimate conversation groups rather than long tables arranged by hierarchy; an absolute confidence in the miracle of a pot luck where there is always enough for all.

The meal at Herod's palace ended in death and horror. The meal in the meadow ended in thousands feeling fed, spiritually and physically. Jesus always saw possibility rather than defeat, and he invites us to do likewise. He took five loaves and saw abundance. He saw 12 disciples and saw power.

In our clenched hands, five loaves and two fish will never be more than five loaves and two fish. But if we open our hands, open our hearts, draw upon our faith, God will take the five loaves and two fish and make it enough to feed 5000! It is guaranteed.

In this deserted place, Jesus made the people a home – because after all, what is home but a place where someone says “You need not go away. Here is food.” Jesus says it first. He then asks us to do the same.

AMEN