



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 9 Proper 13 (A)

Which Party?

[RCL]: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7,16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

For the past several Sundays, our Gospel readings have been focused on Jesus' parables as recorded by Matthew. First, there was the parable of the sower, then the parable of the weeds and the wheat, and last week, a whole panoply of parables: the mustard seed, the yeast, the pearl. Jesus used these parables to teach his followers about his vision of the kingdom of God. He begins each parable by saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is like," and then proceeds to spin a short, simple tale, filled with memorable characters and striking action.

At least, these tales seem short and simple on the surface; but they hold hidden depths of meaning. That's the way metaphors work: they reveal hidden truths by extending what we know — a woman baking bread, for example — into something we don't know yet. They expand our understanding by using the known to show us the unknown.

Jesus was a master of this style, and parables make up approximately a third of his teaching in the New Testament. Parabolic teaching is as cogent and powerful today as it was in the first century. We still use metaphors and similes on a daily basis to explain the world, to enliven our speech, and to help us grow in learning from what we know into what we don't know.

But in today's Gospel, we turn from parable to miracle, with Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand. Miracles, for better or worse, are much less convincing to the modern mind than parables are. On this side of the Enlightenment, we know that people can't walk on water, water doesn't suddenly turn into wine, and that five loaves of bread will never be enough to feed 5,000 people. Sometimes these stories seem childish at best, foolish at worst — mere wish fulfillment, disconnected from reality, a ploy to entrance and manipulate the gullible.

Still, miracle stories were common in the ancient world, within Christianity and beyond. Telling and retelling stories of Jesus' miracles was an important way Jesus' early followers remembered and honored him, and how they tried to share his good news with others. And the story we heard today — the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes — was perhaps the most important miracle of all.

It's the only miracle included in all of the Gospels. Matthew and Mark like the story so much, in fact, that they each tell it twice, with slight variations: in one version Jesus feeds five thousand people, and in the other, four thousand. That means this story is told six times in the Gospels. And there are only four Gospels. Perhaps there's more going on in this story than an entertaining fairy tale.

Each version presents the same dilemma: crowds have followed Jesus out to a deserted place to hear him teach. When evening comes, it becomes clear that people haven't come prepared. There's not enough food — the disciples only have a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish — and the people are hungry. The disciples don't know what to do. In some versions, as in Matthew today, they suggest that Jesus should send the people away, to fend for themselves in the nearby villages. In some versions — again, as in Matthew today — Jesus turns to the disciples and tells them: “You give them something to eat.”

“You give them something to eat” is the heart of this miracle. Jesus is saying those words to us today, just as clearly as he said them to his disciples on the deserted shores of the far side of the Sea of Galilee all those centuries ago. There is a hungry world out there, and it is our responsibility, our duty, to feed them. This hunger is both spiritual and physical. And although it may look like there's not enough bread to go around, the miracle we recounted today teaches us that, in fact, if we open our eyes, we will see that there is enough - that God has already provided enough bread to feed every last person on earth. It just depends on how you divide it up.

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan argues in his book *The Power of Parable* that the miracle stories in the Gospels are really parables in disguise. Miracles are parables told *about* Jesus and should be understood in a similar way to — and taken as seriously as — the parables *of* Jesus. The miracle we heard today may seem simple on the surface: Jesus is able to magically multiply bread and fish. But push a little deeper, and it's really a parable about how we see the world. Is there enough to go around, or not? What does it mean to share this world God has given us? What kind of people are we going to be — those who share or those who hoard?

Both Matthew and Mark drive home this point by providing a prelude to the miracle story. In both Gospels, the feeding of the five thousand is directly preceded by the story of Herod beheading John the Baptist. The connection between these two stories might not be immediately clear, but here is how Mark and Matthew tell it: John has been in prison for some time for accusing Herod of adultery with Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod throws a feast for his birthday, inviting his rich and powerful friends. Herodias' daughter dances before Herod at the feast, which pleases him, and he tells her she can have whatever she wants in return. She asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter — and Herod obliges her.

Herod's feast is exclusive, a private gala for the rich and the powerful, and leads to death. Jesus' feast is inclusive, a community picnic for the poor and the oppressed, and leads to life. Which party would you like to attend?

As often as we take the Eucharist, we reenact Jesus' picnic on the lakeshore. Just like on that day, Jesus takes our bread, blesses it, breaks it, and shares it with all who are hungry. And he is calling us to do the same with our lives — take the blessings God has given, break them open, and share them with others. Jesus is calling us today: Come to the party where no one goes hungry, where there is bread and joy and life for all. Amen.

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