

Proper 13a
August 3, 2008
Mt 14.13-21
Fr. Dow Sanderson

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All of our readings from Holy Scripture this morning are concerned with the loving provisions of a God who cares deeply for the needs of his people.

We are reminded of our sojourn in the wilderness, and even though we “acted presumptuously” the Lord did not withhold manna from our mouth, and gave us water to drink.

St. Paul reminds us in that wonderful passage from Romans that is so often our comfort in times of grief... that nothing can separate us from the love of God: not nakedness nor peril nor sword, nor height nor depth nor even death itself.

And in our Gospel for this morning, we hear one of the most well-known events in the Life of Christ. Every Sunday School child knows the story of the Feeding of the 5000. St. John’s Gospel even introduces us to a “little lad” who is the one who offers the meager offering of loaves and fishes...making the story all the more compelling for children.

This miracle was seen as so pivotal in the ministry of Jesus that it appears in all four Gospels. The earliest Christians clearly saw in it a foreshadowing of the eucharist, and it is within that context that it is nearly always preached in Catholic Christianity.

In more modern times, as credence in the miraculous was seen by some as rather embarrassing, attempts have been made to reinterpret this story as being more about enlightened attitudes, about overcoming greed, and a rather felicitous redistribution of wealth.

But as I approach this sermon, I have a couple of assumptions.

I assume that that you, like me, take this story at face value. Liberal Protestant are the ones who have trouble with miracles. But folks who believe in Transubstantiation and Marian apparitions aren’t likely even to blink!

And secondly, I assume that you have heard this passage of scripture preached on so many times that there is very little I can tell you about it that you haven’t already heard!

So, with that in mind, I would like to zero in on just two details.

First, the disciples described the setting of this miracle as a “lonely” place. For some reason, that word really strikes me. There are a lot of lonely and isolated people in this world. And sometimes, the most lonely are the ones surrounded by a frenzied crowd. You don’t have to live alone in the woods in order to feel disconnected. The lonely heart is a place that Christ longs to visit, and the lonely are those whom the church ought more and more to seek and love. Just as on the occasion of this miracle, so long ago, at the end of the day, with the melancholy of evening approaching, Our Lord lifted up his eyes to heaven, blessed and broke bread, and filled the hearts of the hungry.

Secondly, I want to say a word or two about the response of Jesus. When the disciples clamor to send the people away because they are hungry, Jesus says, You give them something to eat.

Can't you imagine how they must have felt? Have you ever had a situation turn so quickly... where you went... in the blinking of an eye from passive observer to active participant? It can be unnerving.

But it is very illustrative for us of the partnership that God wishes to have. And getting that partnership "out of balance" can be catastrophic.

Let me illustrate what I mean:

A week or two ago, at our usual hominy grill after-mass breakfast, the conversation turned to southern revivals and our experiences of them. I opined that, as a child, I always felt sorry for the preacher when nobody walked up the aisle to be saved. George Hubbard stated that if the organist had just known better how to "juice the seats" with just the right songs and tonal qualities, the results would have been more satisfying. This remark caused Fr. Dan to spew coffee through his nose, but let's not go there.

The point was, that even as a little child, my assumption was that, if people weren't being saved, it was the minister's fault. Somehow, he hadn't done his job well enough. And in thinking that way, I was a little heretic and didn't even know it. It is a heresy called Pelagianism, and it describes the spiritual pride of thinking that our own works can bring in the Kingdom of God.

But if getting our partnership with God out of balance, erring on the side of our own works is a sickness unto death, so is its opposite.

Do you remember the aphorism Let Go and Let God? I suppose it is helpful up to a point. We do sometimes tend to get in God's way. But for far too many, that notion leads to a sort of spiritual passivity. It is easy to rely on the kindness of others... and sometimes, we make a habit of it.

Every parent has been amazed by the things a three year old can do for himself... And equally startled by the things an 18 year old cannot!

It is not attractive when adults, who are perfectly capable, wring their hands pitifully and whine, what will we do, it is dark and there's nothing to eat!

It is precisely at such a moment that Jesus steps in and says, your turn. You have gifts. Let's see how you can use them.

It is precisely, as I have mentioned... a partnership:

- a need is seen.
- God initiates.
- we are called to respond.

The Blessed mother is invited to bear the Christ... and she responds, Be it unto me according to thy word.

The disciples are invited to follow.
Sinners are invited to repent.
The lame are invited to walk.
The dead are raised.

But in every case, there is an invitation.

What do you want?

Whom do you seek?
Do you want to be healed?

And faith, blessed faith, calls us to respond... with whatever meagerness we have, in order that the abundance of God and his blessed generosity may be seen by all.

And so it is that we have come.
And so it is that God has called us.
And so it is we bring our gifts...

Blessed art thou Lord,
God of all Creation.
Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
Which earth has given, and human hands have made.
It will become for us the Bread of Heaven.

Blessed be God Forever.

+++*AMEN*