

A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost 2014 Proper 13A  
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To be honest, I had intended to talk about Jacob this Sunday. We've been reading the story of Jacob for a few weeks now, and it seemed like about time that we reflected on what we've been reading, but when we received the urgent request from Mount Airy Net to replenish the shelves of the food bank this week, I realized that it was important to leave Jacob and his family aside for another week and talk about loaves and fishes.

The story we heard from Matthew's gospel today is one of the principle stories that has shaped Christian tradition and Christian mission since the beginning of Christianity. We often call it the feeding of the five thousand, but you will no doubt have noticed that the crowd that was fed in the story was many more than five thousand, since the women and children weren't included in the count.

It's a story of abundance, and of wonder – in some ways more astonishing than the many healings that Jesus did.

And it's a story that prefigures the way that Christians have gathered and worshiped ever since, for the feeding of many with a small amount of bread is fundamental to our practice and understanding of Communion.

But in some ways, it's a very unremarkable story in that things like this are happening every day in the world.

In his book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis points out that the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and even that other miracle of abundance, the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana are not really different than the transformations that happen every year in our oceans and farms and vineyards. Small amounts of grain, small numbers of fish grow until they can feed a multitude. Through the agency of sunshine and vines and yeast and tender care, water is turned into wine all the time.

And for C. S. Lewis, this is not an indication of the ordinariness of the feeding of the five thousand, but of the miraculousness of the world that nourishes all of us. The growth of fish and grain and grape is no less miraculous just because it usually happens more slowly than in the gospel story.

And there are other kinds of feeding miracles. Let me tell you a couple of stories.

When I was just out of seminary, I served as a chaplain to a homeless shelter in San Francisco run by the Diocese of California. The shelter offered breakfast and dinner to the residents, but not lunch, and it was the custom of one of the nearby churches to host what in California would be called a barbecue, but out here would be called a cookout (because we served hotdogs and hamburgers) for the residents of the shelter at lunchtime four times a year. As it happened, a few days before one of these cookouts, one of the residents of the shelter showed his printed announcement to a staff member from one of

the downtown feeding programs that did offer lunch, and that program, thinking it was an open invitation, decided to take a day off, close their facility, and send their clients to us.

It turned out that word spread, and four other feeding programs decided to do the same thing, so that by the time the volunteers got to the church to light the charcoal and begin setting up for the cookout, there was a line down to the end of the block of hungry people. And long before we were ready to begin serving, the line stretched nearly around the very large city block where the church was located.

Since we were expecting about a hundred people and the line had eight times that many, volunteers were dispatched to every grocery store in the area to buy up all of their hotdogs and buns and potato salad and bag lettuce and Crystal Light lemonade and chips and baked beans and ice, not to mention paper plates and plastic cups and flatware while everyone who lived nearby raided their pantries and refrigerators for ketchup and mustard and relish. We wheeled a cart down the line to serve lemonade and water to those who were waiting to try to keep the line orderly and the many people who were emotionally unstable from becoming agitated or violent. The bishop's mother, who was a member of the congregation, had brought a couple of large pans of her homemade blueberry cobbler, and she went from table to table, dishing out miniscule portions, augmented by store bought cookies, and had a conversation with each person she served.

In the end, over eight hundred people were fed, and no one was turned away.

Here's another story. My sister and her family belong to a Roman Catholic congregation out in California. The priest of that parish is new there, and last year he decided, together with the church's outreach team, to do something different with the outreach budget. Instead of spreading the money thinly between organizations the community supported, he gave the money back to the congregation. Inspired by the parable of the three servants, he handed out money in fifty and hundred dollar increments with the instruction that the parishioners were to do their best to make the money grow before returning it to the church to serve the needy. The money, about, two thousand dollars in all, was used to fund lemonade stands and stock investments and bake sales and even to advertise a fundraising concert members of the community put on.

And in the end, the congregation returned over thirty thousand dollars to the outreach budget.

A Presbyterian pastor friend of mine does a similar thing on a smaller scale. He gives each member of the congregation a dollar once a year, and charges them to come back with a story of how they used the money to make a difference. The stories are collected and published, and the whole congregation become the outreach team of the church.

These stories of mine all have one thing in common with today's gospel lesson. For you see, the essential thing about the story of the disciples' feeding of the crowd is not the

everyday miracle of a little becoming enough, but the interaction between Jesus and the disciples.

The disciples want to send the crowd away before hunger makes them unruly, but Jesus says, “no, you give them something to eat.” And in the original Greek, the word “you” is made emphatic. Jesus tells his followers that feeding the hungry is their task, but more importantly, he tells them and then shows them that despite their doubts, what they already have is enough.

We don’t know for certain whether the bread and fish kept dividing repeatedly, or if, as some have suggested, the act of sharing from so meager a store caused others in the crowd to pull out the food that they had hidden away for themselves so that all were able to eat. But it doesn’t really matter. Whether it was the miracle of fecundity or the no less wondrous miracle of generosity, all were fed, and what they had already was enough.

We know that the hunger in our community, and in our nation, and indeed in the world is not caused by there being too little food. The United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization reports that current worldwide food production is enough to give every single person 2,700 Calories a day – enough not merely to live on, but for every man, woman and child in the world to become obese. So science confirms what Jesus shows us – what we already have is enough.

That in itself is a miracle. But it leaves us with the challenge that Jesus gave his first followers: “you give them something to eat.”

I don't propose to solve the difficult economic, logistical and social problem of world hunger here and now. But I can state with certainty that what we have among us is enough to feed the hungry of our own neighborhood. To those of you who have brought food this week for Mount Airy Net, I say, on their behalf and on behalf of those who will eat because of your generosity, thank you. For those of you who haven't yet brought anything, it will never be too late. Jesus said “the poor will always be with you,” and history has shown him to be right so far. So keep on sharing from the miraculous gifts that you have been given so that others may eat and share in the miracle of God's abundance. The shopping cart where we collect food for Mount Airy Net is always in the narthex. Let's make sure it, and the shelves at the food bank, are never empty again.

What we already have is certainly enough for that.

And if you want to learn more about what you can do to help with the larger problem of world hunger, come to church on August 24<sup>th</sup>, when the Rev. Bruce Torrey of the organization Food for the World will be joining us to preach, preside, and talk about his organization's work and how we can support them in their drive to end world hunger.

Not only is what we have already been given enough – in both our food and in our generous hearts – but when we combine those gifts with those generous hearts, both the gifts and our hearts, almost miraculously, continue to grow.

Amen.