



The Episcopal Church of
St. John the Baptist

"YOU give them something to eat!" Going beyond meeting immediate needs to build community

Sermon for Sunday, August 2, 2020 (9th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 13A, Track 2)

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It sounded like a reasonable request:

"This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

I mean, wouldn't you have said the same thing? You're standing there looking at a crowd of over five thousand people, realizing that they're going to be getting hungry pretty soon... and all you have is five loaves of bread and two fish... so you figure it's time to wrap up this healing ministry and let them go on their way.

After all, Jesus has already been somewhat "put out" by these people. Our Gospel reading starts by telling us that "when Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

What Jesus had just "heard about John," his cousin, is that he had been killed – beheaded – by Herod, the king of the Jewish province of Judea. Jesus withdrew to a deserted place by himself because he was grieving, because he needed to be alone.

But when the crowds heard this, "they followed him on foot from the cities." Although we often see Jesus inviting people to follow him, in this case, he is followed without invitation! Despite his desire to be alone in a time of grief, he graciously responds to the crowds and heals their sick.

After all that, the disciples must have figured, "Ok, the show's over. We've tended to these people's needs, it's late, Jesus wants to pray already, so let's send these people on back to town."

An entirely reasonable request, right? But Jesus wasn't done yet.

"There's no need to send them away," he says.

Jesus resists the natural human impulse to leave people to tend to their own needs.

"*You give them something to eat,*" he says. In other words, "we will take care of them, here." And then he proceeds to take the disciples' small ration of food and somehow make it more than enough to feed the entire crowd.

Why did Jesus do it? The scripture doesn't say that the crowds were starving or unable to afford their own food - in fact, the disciples' comments seem to assume that the people are perfectly capable of going back into town and providing for their own needs. Unlike the stories of Jesus healing people who have been suffering from physical maladies for years that no one else has been able to heal, this miracle is, in practical terms, a bit superfluous. Jesus didn't *have* to provide food for the entire crowd. So why does he do it?

In discussing this story, people often get hung up on wondering whether or not Jesus actually broke the laws of physics and multiplied the loaves and fishes, or whether Jesus's act of generosity motivated others to share food that they already had with them. That debate misses the point, however, because Jesus's miracles in the Bible are never primarily about the fact that Jesus has power to break the laws of physics.

In discerning which of the many stories circulating about Jesus's life would be included in what became our sacred scriptures, the early church always rejected stories about Jesus performing miracles simply for miracles' sake. There were plenty of those stories out there, but the church chose not to include them in the Bible. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for instance, includes stories of Jesus as a child, zapping his friends with lightning when they get into arguments with him, or making birds out of clay and then bringing them to life, just for fun. It is significant that none of the stories that depict Jesus as a reckless superhero were canonized by the church.

In the four Gospels included in our New Testament, the texts the church deemed authoritative for teaching about the life of Jesus to future generations, Jesus's miracles are always more than just showy displays of power. In fact, Jesus is often telling the disciples *not* to tell anyone about the miracles he performs, especially in the Gospel of Mark. In the biblical stories, Jesus's miracles always have a deeper significance, a meaning and implication for how we are to live our lives in faith.

Given that, what are we to make of this story of the feeding of the five thousand - a story which, significantly, is included in **all four Gospels** in the

New Testament? Why did the Gospel authors all include the story of this "unnecessary" miracle, if not just to show Jesus's power?

Jesus's feeding of the five thousand says something deeply profound about the way we are to approach others in our Christian ministry: **We are called not just to respond to immediate needs, but to go the extra mile in creating a space for community.**

In a culture where who you ate with was of utmost importance to your place in the society, Jesus resists what would have been the natural inclination of the people to go about their separate ways, eating only with those who were considered socially appropriate. Instead, he feeds everyone together, breaking down the barriers of who was clean and unclean and in and out and including everyone in one big community, right there on the hillside. Before the disciples knew what was happening, strangers were breaking bread with strangers, probably sharing stories about how grateful they were that their friend or relative had finally been healed of such-and-such disease, and beginning to form a community together over a shared meal.

The deeper miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is in Jesus's rejection of the patterns of disconnection in society that say "let them go off and buy food for themselves" and insisting instead, "there's no need to send them away. We will provide for them here."

In our current context, the patterns of disconnection in society have become deeply rooted patterns of division. People not only refuse to share community with those different from themselves, they actively denigrate those seen as the "other," particularly when it comes to politics. This week, a group of us from St. John's will be attending the Kaleidoscope Summer Institute, a series of talks and trainings on how to bridge differences and communicate across divides.

I am particularly looking forward to hearing this Tuesday morning's speaker: John Wood, Jr., an African-American man who is the former vice-chairman of the Republican Party of Los Angeles County. Wood works with an organization called "Braver Angels," which defines itself as "a citizens' organization uniting red and blue Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America." This organization breaks down divides by hosting intentional dialogues between conservative and liberal, Republican and Democratic people who come together to try to truly understand one

another's perspectives during a time when some say our country is more divided than it has been since the Civil War.

According to their website, "[*Braver Angels*](#) was inspired by the words of Abraham Lincoln, who not only called on Americans to summon the “better angels” of our nature — but called on us to find the *courage* needed to pursue a more perfect union, “with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right.” To meet the current moment, at this time of national crisis, we need more than civility. We need to challenge ourselves to work together when we disagree. [**We need bravery.**](#)"

While the thousands of people gathered on that hillside in Galilee two thousand years ago weren't necessarily political rivals, it's a fair assumption that in a crowd that large, which some scholars say was larger than the combined population of all the towns along the Sea of Galilee at that point in history, there was bound to be a wide range of views. It would be statistically extremely unlikely that everyone on that hillside came from the same background and agreed with one another on everything.

The disciples' instinct was to send them away to provide for themselves, which they certainly could have done and which would have been an entirely reasonable course of action. There was no physical need to provide food for them. Had they sent them away, the people would have naturally gathered with their families and like-minded friends for their evening meal that night. There wouldn't have been anything *wrong* with that.

But encounter with Jesus always pushes us to do not just what is necessary or needed, but to "go the extra mile," an expression which has its origin in Jesus's own words about going two miles with someone who forces you to go with them one mile. In this case, going the extra mile meant providing a space for building community in a very large and diverse group of people. To be a follower of Jesus is to reject our natural impulse to let others fend for themselves, and instead reach out to build community across differences.