

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 18, 2012
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Chronicles 36:14-21
Psalm 122
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 6:4-15

One could make a case that the miracle story we've read from John's Gospel is *the* most important miracle story in the New Testament. For it is the one miracle story that appears in all four Gospels. No other miracle story does.

This story is one of seven "signs" which John uses to point to Jesus' nature. It says something about Jesus, and about ourselves, that was simply too important for the Gospel writers to leave out.

In a world hungering for the bread of earth, hungering for the bread of life, wandering in a wilderness of its own making, this story is too important to be left out even today. It matters.

The way John tells it, the story begins with human need. The crowds follow Jesus because they see the "signs" he is performing. They see what Jesus is doing for the poor, the sick, those pushed to the edge of society.

It is Passover time. Perhaps many who follow Jesus here remember how the people had followed God out into the wilderness, crossing a sea as the waters

parted. Perhaps they remember how God had fed their ancestors with manna in the wilderness under the great leader Moses.

The crowd here in John's gospel is Israel. But the crowd is also *humanity*. Humanity with all its misery and need. Once again human need and Jesus come together.

The way John tells it, we go immediately to the miracle story. There is no teaching. There are no healings. John cuts right to the chase. As the crowd of 5,000 approaches, Jesus turns to Phillip and says, "what will you do with these folks? How will we feed them?"

John tells us that this question for Phillip is only a *test*. It is a similar situation as we saw in the story of Abraham and Isaac a few weeks ago, when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The text stated there that it was a "test" of Abraham.

And now Phillip is being tested. Jesus knows what he will do. It's a *test*. Perhaps that is the key word. It is a *test*. It's a test for the disciples, for Phillip, and maybe it is a test for those of us here today as well.

In the story, there are two possible answers to the test. The first is Phillip's: "Even if we had six months wages, we couldn't possibly feed all these people."

Phillip is a realist. And Phillip is *right*. And I completely identify with Phillip, because he experiences debilitating human inadequacy in the face of the

problems of this world. And when we look at the problems that confront us in this world, when we see how big those problems really are, and when we take stock of our meager resources, don't *you* feel inadequate? I do.

Think for a minute just about the physical problem facing the crowd here: hunger. In a way hunger is an easy problem. It's not like cancer, or aids. We've known the answer to hunger for a good long time now.

But factors that make for hunger are complex. There is war, and drought, and unjust economic systems. There are unwise agricultural practices, failures in transportation. What do people like us know about these things? What can *we* do about it?

Today at least 750 million people on this planet will go to bed hungry, many of them children. That's 2.5 times the population of the United States. They will go to bed hungry.

So it's easy to begin to talk like Phillip. We understand Phillip. We say, "if we devoted the entire federal budget of the USA to eradicating poverty, it wouldn't make a difference. It wouldn't change a thing. It would be a drop in the bucket.

We can do almost nothing...

But if we are not careful, saying we can do almost nothing is nearly the same as saying to God, "*You* can do almost nothing." You're not in charge, you're not sovereign over this world, you don't provide."

That amounts to unbelief. To unfaith.

But then there's Andrew.

Here's a little boy's lunch. (This little boy appears only in John's Gospel.)

Five barley loaves -- the food of the poor -- and two tiny fish.

It's not that Andrew is some great role model. He presents this food and almost immediately he verbally takes it back. "But what is this among so many people?"

Andrew hasn't got *much* faith. He's got faith the size of the grain of a mustard seed. Faith the size of a small boy's lunch. Five loaves and two fish worth of faith. It isn't much.

But it's enough...

Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, and begins to distribute it. The wise guys in the back row must have had a field day with this. *But there is a miracle.* There is enough, and some to spare.

There are some who try to explain what happens here by saying that more than one person was prudent enough to pack a lunch before going out into the wilderness. Inspired by Jesus, they were moved to share, and whenever people share with others it is indeed a miracle. Like a church potluck where everyone brings something and there's always some left over at the end.

Is that the way it happened? I don't know. Does it matter? In the end, a miracle explained is a miracle explained away. It happens. There is enough to spare. A basket for each of the twelve tribes of Israel...

You and I don't have very much to feed the world, with either the bread of this earth or the bread of life. We have very little. We have a little time, torn from the duties of life. We have a little money, some of which we can spare.

We don't have very much. *But not having very much is not the same as having nothing.*

There are a few people who know this. There was a young woman who grew up in Albania, the poorest and most backward country in Europe. Not a country where women are well educated or well respected. But she wanted to give what she had to the service of Jesus.

And so she traveled to India. Her resources were remarkably small. In the beginning she didn't even speak the language. The problems there are so huge. In the city of Calcutta, thousands of people were dying on the streets, and she couldn't do much for them, but she decided that it would be possible for her to help some of the dying to die with peace and with dignity.

Do you remember her? Of course you do. She was Theresa. She once said, "it is impossible to do great things, but it is possible to do small things with great love."

Five loaves and two fish.

But you don't have to go to India to meet people like that. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock tells the story of growing up in a home where his mother was always cooking delectable treats, usually for other people.

Craddock would come home from school and enter a house filled with the wonderful smell of brownies or other goodies. He would make his way toward the freshly baked treats and his mom would say, "don't touch -- it's for the church."

The next day he'd come home to something equally wonderful, and he would hear, "don't touch, Fred, it's for the church."

Craddock resented this for a time. Until the day he was old enough to take what his mom cooked to the person who needed it. She was a widow down the street, alone now in a world grown suddenly gray. Young Fred took a tuna casserole to her and knocked on her door. When she opened the door, he handed it to her and said, "it's from the church."

The woman hugged him and began to cry. Because what young Fred took to her wasn't just a tuna casserole. It was love in a lonely world. And love is always a miracle.

Desmond Tutu once said: "Every time we do something good, God takes that good and weaves it into the pattern of the universe." Even if it's five loaves and two fish. Even if it's tuna casserole.

Typically, the sermon would end here and we'd be finished. But just one thing more. When Andrew gave the little boy's lunch to Jesus, Jesus took the bread, and gave thanks, and gave it to those around him.

Do you remember the Greek word for "giving thanks"? It's *Eucharist*.

The Gospel of John doesn't have a "Last Supper" story, a "Lord's Supper" story. Why that is so remains a mystery. But this story, and the discourse that follows it, replace it in John's Gospel. It's Passover time.

Do you remember what will happen at another Passover in another upper room, when Jesus will take bread and give thanks, and break it and give it to his disciples?

Jesus gave *himself*. Jesus never asks of us what he has not first already given. He gives *himself*. We may not have five loaves and two fish. We may not even have a tuna casserole. But we have ourselves.

We have almost nothing. But almost nothing is not the same as nothing. We have ourselves.

Is it enough?

Could it possibly be enough?

It's absurd and ridiculous to even ask the question.

But if we give it to Jesus, it *is* enough. It's *more* than enough.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

