

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY RALLY DAY

(09/09/18)

Scripture Lesson: II Kings 4:42-44
Matthew 14:13-21; 15:29-39

I am very happy to welcome you all here for Rally Day, for the start of a new church year! I am also grateful to the Diaconate for changing the date of our communion service this month from the first Sunday to today, for I can think of no better way to begin a new church year and to celebrate our fellowship together than by sharing in the Sacrament of Holy Communion!

This morning, as we embark upon yet another journey as a community of faith that has carried out its ministry in this little section of Southborough for over 153 years, we pause to reflect on that which has sustained us, and which continues to sustain us: the spiritual bread that God provides for our journey.

As you know, most of my closest colleagues over the almost fifty years of my ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ have been Roman Catholic priests and members of several different Roman Catholic women's religious communities. Over the years I have learned a lot about a branch of the Christian faith that, I am ashamed to admit, I held in disdain when I was younger. In my own spiritual journey, I draw heavily from the monastic tradition and the lives and writings of the mystics. I was even told many years ago by a group of Franciscan monks with whom I was working as a psychological consultant that they considered me to be an honorary Franciscan. I can't tell you how much this meant to me—especially in light of the special devotion I have for Francis of Assisi!

This morning, a time of new beginnings, let's begin at the end--at what the Roman Catholic church used to call the Sacrament of Last Rites, and which is now called the Sacrament of Healing. In this sacrament, the hearing of confession, the anointing with holy oil, and the offering of communion to a person who is dying is a beautiful and powerful way of preparing the person for the journey into that realm which we enter after we die. The wafer which is offered to the dying person is called the *viaticum*. The priest, nun, or deacon says to the dying person, "Receive, my brother or sister, this bread for your journey." The Latin word *viaticum* could, then, be translated as "bread for the journey."

The theme of bread for the journey occurs time and time again in scripture. The prophet Elijah, alone and discouraged in a cave during his flight from Queen Jezebel, was fed by an

angel who brought him bread, who encouraged him to partake, and who convinced him he needed to take care of himself, to remain strong for the conflict that lay before him. The ancient Israelites, who wandered forty years in the wilderness, discouraged and disillusioned during their exodus from Egypt, were fed by God. God provided them with manna, a bread-like substance that came to them every morning. God miraculously provided both Elijah and the Israelites with their daily bread, feeding not only their bodies but also their souls.

This morning we listened to a third account of a miraculous and providential gift of bread--Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, also known as the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

There are three versions of this story in scripture. The first is the account which we read this morning from Matthew and which is paralleled in Mark 6:34-35 and Luke 9:12-17--Jesus' feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets left over. A second account of a miraculous feeding occurs in the second New Testament reading we heard this morning from Matthew 15:29-39, an account paralleled in Mark 8:1-10--Jesus' feeding of the four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish, with seven baskets left over.

Jesus must have been having an off day in that second miracle; although he had two more loaves and more fish, he only fed four thousand instead of five, and he only had seven baskets left over instead of twelve. I guess we all have our good days and our bad days! The third account is found in the Gospel according to John, where John tells us that a little boy brought forth the five loaves of barley and the two fish. We also find a parallel in the Old Testament lesson we heard this morning--the account of Elijah feeding one hundred men with twenty loaves of barley and several ears of grain.

It is unfortunate when people turn away from the Christian faith because they do not believe in miracles. As I mentioned last week, religion is not about science. We obviously do not know whether Elijah fed one hundred men with twenty loaves of barley, or whether Jesus actually fed five thousand men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish, but we know that miracles do happen!

It is important to remember that Jesus' authority as our Lord, as our Savior, as our guide in the deepening of our relationship with God does not depend on his ability to set aside the laws of nature--to walk on water or turn water into wine. These stories, which were written down many years after they happened, may or may not be historically accurate. What is important is

that they convey to us a deep spiritual truth, a truth that was true in Jesus' time and is also true in our time. The stories may not be outwardly true, but they convey a profound inner truth.

What is the situation presented in our gospel lesson? Jesus has just heard what happened to John the Baptist. His disciples have just told him how Salome, the daughter of Herodias, asked Herod the tetrarch for John's head on a platter. Jesus, overcome by grief, wants to get away, to spend some time alone. Scripture tells us he goes off with his disciples by boat to a deserted place.

However, the people of the nearby towns don't respect his need to have some time for himself. They follow him. When Jesus goes ashore, he sees a great crowd. The next passage is interesting. It tells us that Jesus *had compassion* for the crowd and cured their sick. In the parallel passage in Mark, we read that Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." This is how Jesus responded to the demands of the crowd, demands which must have struck him at times as unreasonable and overwhelming. He responded to these needs or demands with compassion!

Have you ever felt the need to get away, to have some time for yourself? Have you ever felt burned out? Have you ever had that empty feeling inside, the sense that there is nothing left to give? At times like this we tend to react to any demand made upon us with anger, pushing our children or other people away with negative feelings.

When we feel depleted, burned out, with little left to give, only wanting a little time for ourselves, we tend to respond to the needs or demands of others, even those we love, with irritation. Jesus responded with compassion. Jesus set aside his own need to grieve in order to respond to the needs of the multitude. He did what in sports is called a "gut check." He dug down deeper and found what he needed to respond to the situation out of his deepest values. There is a lesson in this scripture passage for us.

This morning, as we partake of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us consider the lesson that is conveyed in this miracle. The central theme is that there doesn't seem to be enough to go around. There is no way the available resources can meet the needs of the situation. And yet, by trusting in God, they somehow do.

Jesus turns to God in his time of need. He turns his eyes to heaven, just as Christian priests and ministers have done for centuries in the consecration of the eucharist. Jesus trusts that God will take what he has and multiply it. He trusts that God will help him respond to the

needs of the situation. With the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus feeds five thousand men, in addition to the women and children. Everyone was fed. No one went away hungry. There was more than enough for everyone. In fact, there were twelve baskets left over, one for each of the twelve disciples to carry forth into his ministry.

Jesus takes what he has, even though it isn't very much, and multiples it. God takes what we have, even though it isn't very much, and multiplies it. He does it for us as individuals, and he does it for us as a church.

In our church, if we trust, miracles will happen. We are not a big church. We don't have a lot of money. We don't have a big pledging base, a lot of endowments, or a rental income. But, just as we will do in a few minutes in our Rally Day luncheon, we each bring what we can. Like the little boy in John's account of the miracle, we bring forth our resources--our time, our talent, our treasure.

We have a wealth of resources within our church. Our church treasurer, Bob Farmer, will attest that he often has to live on hope. And yet, throughout the years, the bills have been paid and the property maintained. Throughout the years, this little church has not only survived, but flourished. Throughout the years, this church has established a vital ministry to all those whose lives have been touched by its teaching, its pastoral care, its worship, by all who have become a part of our church community. We have established a vital outreach ministry to our community and to the world. Jesus tells us that if we trust in God, God will multiply our resources. What we have as a church, though it may not seem to be much, will be more than enough.

We know that if we trust, miracles can happen. As individuals, we often feel depleted, drained. The demands of family, both financial and emotional, on young couples today are tremendous. Children place a tremendous demand on parents, especially on mothers. How difficult it is to respond with compassion, as Jesus did, instead of irritation. The needs of one's spouse, difficult as they are to understand and challenging as they are to meet, often call for a gut check. The needs of elderly parents or teenagers who are struggling with an addiction weigh heavy on many middle age couples. As individuals, as marital couples, and as families, we often feel depleted, discouraged; we feel that there is just not enough to go around.

Jesus tells us that we have a depth, a reservoir of resources within. We have the ability to respond with compassion instead of irritation. We have the ability to turn a little into a lot. Our

resources are multiplied if we turn to God in prayer, if we approach God through worship and sacrament and ask not only for what *we* need, but also for what *others* who depend on us need.

In our scripture lesson this morning we are told that Jesus gave the bread to the disciples and the disciples then fed the people. Just as Jesus gave the bread to his disciples, he gives this bread to us, his twenty-first century disciples. He gives it to us, but it is not meant for us alone. He gives it to us so that we can share it with others.

As we draw near to God this morning through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us do so in the light of the miracle which we heard this morning. Let us ask God to help us respond to the burdens that weigh heavy on our shoulders. Let us ask God to take the little faith we have, the faith of a grain of mustard seed, that it might grow and flourish. Let us ask God to take the limited resources we have as a church and bless them that they might multiply, that all whose lives are touched by this little church will be fed, and that there will be baskets left over for us as disciples to carry forth into the world.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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