

Proper 12 Year B July 26, 2015. The Feeding of the 5,000.

All four of our Gospels have the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and that suggests that the story is important and points to who Jesus is. It also suggests that it has a very old, oral tradition, and acquired various shades of meaning with each retelling¹. Like witnesses to an automobile accident, we don't expect their accounts to be completely consistent, especially with regard to details and our Gospel witnesses are no different. Yet each witness has something important to contribute, and each perspective is needed to provide fuller meaning and to paint a more complete picture.

Mark's Gospel is generally regarded as the oldest, written Gospel and it forms the basis of the stories in Matthew and Luke. John's Gospel shares the same oral tradition as the Synoptic Gospels, and differs with key details that are essential to what John wishes to convey to his audience. I'll talk more about that in a moment. Here is where all four agree: the resources at hand are five loaves of bread and two fish; there is green grass; all had enough to eat and were satisfied; and there is enough left over to fill 12 baskets. Each Gospel either directly or indirectly notes the staggering cost of having to buy sufficient bread, or

roughly 200 denarii. The numbers have significance for the story tellers and are memory devices for them as they tell the story: so the number “2” helps them remember 2 fish and 200 denarii; the number 5 helps them remember 5 loaves and 5000 people as well as provide a subtle reminder of the five books of Moses, and the 12 baskets, of course, represent the 12 tribes of Israel as well as each of the Apostles².

Mark implicitly and John more explicitly are playing on themes found in the Hebrew Scripture, which the early Jewish Christians would have recognized. So we see hints of the 23rd Psalm in Mark, (and if you want to look it up quickly, turn to page 612 in the BCP) remembering that in our reading from last week, Jesus had compassion on the crowd for they were like sheep without a shepherd, and we know that “the Lord is my Shepherd” and that the green grass in the story is like the green pastures that God causes us to rest in. The multiplication of the loaves of bread is both reminiscent of Elisha providing bread in 2 Kings as well as God’s provision of manna in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus. Unspoken but understood is that unlike the bread that God provided in the wilderness, the bread which Jesus blessed, broke and gave provided abundant leftovers for consumption at another time. John especially wants us to see a parallel between Jesus and Moses. He has Jesus go to

the mountain, much like Moses went to Mt. Sinai; he has the crowd declare Jesus a prophet and wants us to understand that Jesus has equal to or better stature as a prophet than Moses. John goes even further, he shows us that Jesus is more than a prophet, that he is a king but the crowd does not understand just what type of king Jesus is, much less what kind of prophet he might be.

John adds characters to the story that the Synoptics leave out. For example, Philip is asked a direct question by Jesus as a test of faith and Andrew points out that a child has some resources that are hardly enough for so large a crowd. John's purpose is to show that faith is THE essential ingredient in miracle stories. In John's telling of the story, Jesus remains the central character who has all of the action.³ It is Jesus, rather than the disciples asking how the crowd will be fed, and then making the miracle happen. In John's account Jesus is not only the host of the gathering, he is also the offering. Here we start getting the picture that Jesus not only provides; He IS the Bread of life. [The bread which we passed out may feed the body, but the bread given at the Eucharist will feed our soul.]

In all of the Gospel accounts we should be reminded of the Eucharist. In the Synoptic Gospels, all have Jesus bless, break and give

the bread and in all of our Eucharistic prayers the priest says the same sequence as we remember the night that Jesus was betrayed. The earliest Christian “how to” manual, the Didache, appears to have drawn from John’s Gospel with its Eucharistic prayer saying “As this broken bread...was gathered up and so became one, so may your church be gathered up from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.”⁴ Only John’s Gospel has Jesus instructing the disciples to “gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” In this way, John has us understand that neither Jesus nor God overlooks anything and seeks to include everything into God’s grace.

All of our Gospel witnesses want us to understand that Jesus is concerned about practical, every day needs and that he cares for the whole person - spiritually and physically. They want us to see that God in Jesus continues to provide in great abundance, and like the 23rd Psalm, our “cup runs over.” They want us to see in new ways. The disciples concerns are reasonable and pragmatic, yet they are grounded in the world’s paradigm and not God’s Kingdom. Christians are called to live into God’s kingdom, thus we are to live faithfully into God’s economy. We are called to look at the resources that God has entrusted to us, we are to gratefully acknowledge these gifts and share them with thanksgiving

confident that there is more than enough. There is a fine line between what we need and what we want. God in Jesus provides all that we need, it may not be all that we want.

So what can we take from the witness of this story [as we saw so wonderfully enacted earlier]? We already know and believe that Jesus is divine. With the greater community's help, we see our neighborhood's need and we seek to meet it - there is always enough. Perhaps we are being called to prayerfully consider our own understanding of limitations and possibilities. Perhaps we are being called to turn away from what we no longer have, such as "the beautiful gardens" or a thriving Sunday School and focus on what we DO have and to multiply that. To continue with the bread analogy, what we DO have is the "yeast" to make the bread rise and to become multiple loaves. We give thanks for all we have, for each and every person here, for the parish family we have become, for the ministries that we undertake and we approach this altar for the life-affirming bread we are about to receive. And we go out into the world sharing what we have, what a special place we are in our part of the body of Christ. Perhaps we are being called to discern together where we need to be fed and nurtured and to deepen our faith to an extent that we recognize no limitations, for all things are possible in

Christ who strengthens me. As the summer months wane and we go into our program year, let us with clear eyes and strong hearts embrace the future that God has in store for us.

AMEN.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Doubleday: New York) 1997, 136

² Paul W. Walasky, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Westminster-John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2014, 185.

³ James A. Brashler, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: John volume 1*, (Westminster-John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2015, 173, 175.

⁴ Ibid.