

Year A 18th Sun OT

Matthew 14:13-21 – *Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes* – by Jerry Fuller, OMI

There were three mice who died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked them how they liked being in heaven. The mice said that it was OK, but since they have such short legs, it was hard for them to get around because heaven was so big. So St. Peter told them that he thought he would be able to help them. After a little while, an angel came to the mice and gave each of them a set of roller skates. Right away, the mice put the roller skates on, and they could zip around heaven, really enjoying themselves. A little later, a certain cat died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked the cat how he liked being in heaven. The cat answered by saying, "Oh, boy, do I like being in heaven! I'm having a great time and I'm really enjoying myself. And most of all, I love those meals on wheels." (1)

Our Gospel speaks of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes for the some 5000 plus people on the hillside. It would be interesting to imagine the apostles on inline skates as they sped down the aisles through the crowds, dispensing the meal. But the main point is not the sight of the apostles serving the crowds (although that is a wonder considering how reluctant the apostles were to get involved in solving this problem); nor is the main point even the fact that Jesus apparently performed a miracle here. No, the main fact is that Jesus shows mercy, has compassion on the crowd. And he wants us to act just as he did, compassionately, mercifully.

Some point out that there was no miracle involved here, but that the people in the crowd all had brought lunches with them in their pockets. When they saw the apostles starting to pass out the meager five loaves and fishes, they brought out their lunches and shared with one another. This theory sounds like the following true story.

After months of hard work and years of saving, the day came for Reb and Jackay to open their own restaurant. All that was needed was the final health inspection and the issuing of their business permit. That was scheduled for first thing that morning; then "Our Place," as they called their restaurant would be in business. But that morning the winds and rains of Hurricane Hugo hit, unexpectedly making its way 200 miles inland to their North Carolina town. Trees were uprooted, power lines were down, homes and stores were destroyed. Reb and Jackay hurried to their restaurant. Everything was intact. A deputy sheriff pulled up and told them that their restaurant,

the fire station next door and a service station down the road were the only ones that had electricity. Re and Jackay called the health inspector to come immediately so they could open, but because of the power outage, he couldn't get into his office to issue the permit. No permit, no business opening. With a refrigerator stocked with 300 pounds of bacon and beef and bushels of tomatoes, lettuce and bread, there was only one thing to do: give the food away. They told the deputy, "Tell your coworkers and other emergency people you see that we'll have free BLT's and coffee for anybody who wants to drop by." Soon firemen, policemen, linemen and other workers were filing into Our Place. When the couple heard that another restaurant was scalping people by charging ten dollars for two eggs, toast and bacon, they placed a sign in their window: FREE BLT'S--FREE COFFEE. Families, travelers and street people were welcomed. Then something began to happen. People started to clean counters and sweep floors. Volunteers took over the dish washing from Jackay and helped Reb at the grill. Hearing about what was going on at Our Place from the local radio station, people from a neighboring town that had not been too badly hit by the storm brought food from their freezers. Stores and dairies sent over chicken, milk and foodstuffs of all kinds. And so the long day went. Those first cups of coffee and BLT's somehow stretched to 16,000 meals. The restaurant's small stock increased by 500 loaves of bread, cases of mayonnaise, 350 pots of coffee and bushels of produce. (2)

The disciples' reaction to the crowd was one of anxiety. "Every tomorrow has two handles," said Henry Ward Beecher. "We can take hold of it with the handle of anxiety or the handle of faith." Jesus approached the problem with the handle of faith. Once Jesus started to act confidently, telling the apostles to start handing out the five loaves and two fishes, the apostles, and it seems everyone else, caught the spirit and started to pitch in to help one another.

Jesus had just learned of the death of his friend, John the Baptist. He had wanted to retire to a quiet place to mourn, but the crowds followed him...so many that he had to feed them. But it was in involving himself compassionately in feeding the crowds that Jesus found his grief fading away. We always feel better, whether we are grief-stricken or in whatever way focusing on ourselves, when we go out to others.

A man's wife had died. He was inconsolable. He took flowers to her grave every day. He consulted a priest-therapist who counseled him for three months. One day the priest saw the flowers the man had brought to his session and the priest said, "Today, I don't want you to go to place those flowers on your wife's grave. I want you

to go to St. John's Hospital down the block and go into each room and give a flower to the patient you find there." The next week the man came to his session in an elated state. "I had a wonderful time giving those flowers away. Those people appreciated them so much and I made so many friends. I can't stay today for my session since I'm going back to visit the new friends I met."

I'm sure Jesus didn't refuse anyone in that crowd from eating, he didn't exclude anyone. Unfortunately our Catholic church is not permitted to give Holy Communion to non-Catholics or Catholics in a so-called bad marriage. I don't think the mercy and compassion that Jesus shows in this gospel would be compatible with such a stand-offish practice as refusing Communion to someone.

Many years ago, there was a woman who lived in a small village in France. Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and needy. After many years of kind and selfless service to the village's families, the woman died. She had no family of her own, so the townsfolk planned a beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman to whom so many owed their lives. The parish priest, however, pointed out that, because she was a Protestant, she could not be buried in the town's Catholic cemetery. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for the priest either, because he too had been cared for by the woman during a serious illness. But the canons of the Church were very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence of the cemetery. The day of the funeral arrived, and the whole village accompanied the woman's casket to the cemetery, where she was buried--outside the fence. But that night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the cemetery. They then quietly set to work--moving the fence.

More astounding than Jesus' feeding of the crowds with a few pieces of bread and fish is Jesus' transforming the crowd into a community, a community united in their need for one another, in the bread they share, in the love of Christ who has brought them together. Christ empowers each one of us to perform our own miracles of creating community when we "move the fences" to include outsiders, when we welcome the rejected and forgotten to our tables, when we give of what little we have, joyfully and gratefully, for the sake of others, when we welcome one another as we would welcome Jesus. (3)

"Someone has pointed out that it would be more accurate to call the story the division of the loaves, rather than the multiplication.... This may seem to be a distinction without a difference, since the important point is that everyone gets fed, but

there is a significant contrast: multiplying the loaves suggests just a change in quantity, whereas dividing the loaves implies a change in quality. Jesus makes do with what is a hand. Blessed and broken, touched by the power of God, it is these specific loaves which are now able to feed the multitude. Jesus doesn't need to clone more loaves; rather, in breaking open the bread he brings forth as no one else could the possibilities and capabilities hidden in the depths of what is already there. And so of course he does with us as well. He breaks us open so that we have the capacity to be, and to do, far more than we otherwise could. He transforms us by making us more fully ourselves, by revealing that identity of which we ourselves are not fully are, the unique, unduplicatable way in which each of us is called to the image of God." (4)

"Dorothy Day, who had started a newspaper to take up the cause of the poor, had very little in the way of finances. But her persuasive friend Pete Maurin had convinced her that God had sent him to help her in this work, and that whatever she had would be sufficient. Dorothy's newspaper staff often were upset by her taking money for their rent or for paper and supplies and spending that needed money for food for the homeless people, who, in the eyes of the staff, were always cluttering up the apartment where they worked. Several times, when it looked as if they would not have the funds to go on because Dorothy had spent the money on the poor, a person would turn up to offer them a gift. It was always just enough to meet the current crisis. Each time Dorothy taught them the lesson that Christ was sufficient to meet their needs." (5)

St. Paul puts it this way: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus the Lord" (Phil. 4: 19). Since this is so, we are to go out to the poor in the mercy and compassion of Jesus and help supply every need of theirs.

References

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2. "A grand opening," *Connections*, 18th Sunday of the Year, August 1, 1999 (7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, N.H. 03053-3905)
3. "Moving fences," *Connections*, 18th Sunday of the Year, August 1, 1999 (7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, N.H. 03053-3905)
4. "Model homily," *Good News* 26 (8): 274 (Liturgical Publications Inc., 2875 South James Drive, New Berlin WI 53151), 1999.
5. "The compassionate Christ," *Lectionaid*, 7 (3): 51 (LectionAid, Inc., P.O. Box 19229 Boulder 80308 - 2229) June, July, August 1999.