

FEEDING WITH PRESENCE

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Feeding of the 5000 in John

Today's account of the feeding of the 5000 is in every gospel so the chances are very good that this actually happened in some manner. That all four tell the story although each version is unique tells us that this event, this miracle was of great importance to all four communities that produced gospels.

This is John's gospel so the theology especially about the nature of Jesus has had about 70 years to develop. In John, Jesus is always completely in charge. He turns to Andrew and asks him what are you going to do yet the text says, "for he already knew what he was planning." So John tells us that Jesus already knows what he planned" but he wants to see what the boys will do about this problem. John's gospel is also one that is filled with symbolism that points to the nature of Jesus.

This is a great story with which to do an Ignatian meditation. I read this story and tried to imagine myself there. The last time I had done this with this passage I found myself as Andrew, stumped by Jesus as to what I was going to do to feed all these people. This time however I found myself just a person in the crowd, but close to where Jesus and the disciples were.

As I sat out in the prayer garden on a cool morning and meditated on this story the image of Jesus distributing the bread and fish kept coming into my mind. The gospel clearly states that he is the one who walked through the crowd. This is unique in the various gospels. In the accounts in the three synoptic gospels he broke the bread and fish and gave it to the disciples to distribute. Now why would John make this exception in his account?

This prompted me to look deeper into the differences and unique features of John's account. He adds the details that there was a lot of grass in this area. That is not what one would expect. That was jarring as I was drawing a picture of the setting and grass would not normally be a part of that scenery. His instruction to the people in Greek translates to sit down in order to eat, which in those days would have meant to recline. So they are reclining in green pastures, which brings to mind the 23rd Psalm and all those rich images of being cared for. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. Put this story in that setting and see how it changes. Jesus becomes the good shepherd long before uttering those words. I will return to this thought in a minute.

One of my friends suggested that the 5 loaves and 2 fish stand for the five books of the Torah and the 2 fish as the old and new covenant with God. The twelve

baskets might represent the 12 tribes or possibly the abundance that the 12 disciples will be given to take out to the people.

As I mediated on this I kept coming back to the centrality of Jesus to this story. He is known in the breaking of the bread. In fact he does the four-fold action of the Eucharist. He takes the bread, blesses the bread, breaks the bread and finally gives the bread of life to his flock. This is at the heart of the Eucharistic service and prayer that we do each week. We see in some respects the first Eucharistic meal here rather than at the Last Supper which has foot washing but no bread and wine in John.

However in all of this the focus is on Jesus. Jesus is the one who feeds the crowd and walks on the water. Over the next few weeks we are going to hear a series of passages about bread and it is critical for John that we understand Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus is giving of himself as he goes through the crowd. Now stop and think for a moment the magnitude of going one by one to feed this huge crowd. That is a miracle in and of itself, but this is also the power of Christ's love, of his willingness to give of himself for all.

Every person there mattered to Jesus. Jesus took the time to be sure that each person was fed, cared for, loved. This is true again and again throughout all the gospels and is an example to us of the call to share, care for and be present to each other. Nobody was ignored or beyond the love of Christ. This is an important message to all of us for so many today are ignored for a variety of reasons. I read an article this week by a priest who was called up short by a member of the parish who told her that she was ignored. This reminded the priest of how important being present is as a priest and as a Christian. It made me wonder who might feel I have ignored them and you might ponder the same question, whom have you ignored that needed you?

Often it is the gift of presence that is the most important gift that we can learn from Jesus. Sometimes the greatest gift we can give is to be present to another who needs to sit down in a green pasture and be cared for. We however get hung up in our busyness and forget that sometimes the most important thing is to simply stop and pay attention. Sometimes we project our busyness onto others, assume they do not have time for us and then complain that they do not pay attention to us. Sometimes we hide behind our own busyness to avoid dealing with things that need our attention.

Being present is a big part of our call as Christians. Remember in the early church everybody cared for each other. In our church everyone is a minister by their baptism. We all have different calls to ministry, but I do believe that we are all called to be present to one another. That is one of the strengths of this parish. This is a rare parish that knows that caring for each other, we call that pastoral care is everyone's job, not just the priest's job. However, we also need to be

wiling to ask for that care when we need it. Jesus and I do not want you to suffer in silence.

Following Jesus' example of caring for all the least and the great really is what Christianity is all about. Our community is strengthened by this building of relationships. I hope that our experiment this next month of 1 service will give the opportunity for more of us to get acquainted with each other. I encourage you to come to the coffee hour and get to know people you may not have met. I suspect that there are a fairly large number of people at each service who do not know people from the other service and that diminishes our community. It is my hope that as we work to restructure our Fellowship Ministry we can work to build stronger community whether through common outreach projects or gatherings that are just fun.

By the way, "Hey how are you doing" should be more than a greeting. It should be an honest question and asked when you have the time for an honest answer. When I ask you how are you, I am extending an invitation to conversation, not just saying hello.

Over the next few years you will be hearing a lot of Jesus talk especially out of our new Presiding Bishop. If you are going to be part of this crazy Jesus movement that I feel stirring in our church then you are going to need to be Jesus' presence in this world. We are his hands and his feet in a hurting world.