

**Weekend of Sunday, August 2, 2020**  
**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 18/Proper 13/Year A**  
**First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-5**  
**Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5**  
**Gospel Reading: Matthew 14:13-21**  
**Sermon Title: “Divine Abundance”**

**Theme**

*After John the Baptist is murdered, Jesus desires a time of solitude. Still, his compassion for others will not allow him to dismiss those who need him, and he is moved to perform one of his greatest miracles.*

**Text**

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard [about the beheading of John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” <sup>17</sup>They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” <sup>18</sup>And he said, “Bring them here to me.” <sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

## Sermon

Jesus had just heard that his cousin John the Baptist had been killed. We don't know how close the cousins, John and Jesus were, but Jesus knew that John was an important figure in his own life, and in his Father's plan to save the world. The news disturbed Jesus and so according to Matthew,

<sup>13b</sup>he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

But a huge crowd followed Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus probably just wanted to be alone. But that's not what he got. Even out in this "deserted place," there were thousands of people; thousands of needy people. So Jesus healed them because he had compassion for them as he always did.

And so the day went like they often did with Jesus preaching and teaching, and performing signs and miracles into the evening. The Disciples urged Jesus to send the crowds away so that they could go get themselves something to eat. And then the thing that I think is the most remarkable part of this story happened:

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said, "They need not go away; *you give them* something to eat."

"Where in the world do you expect us to get enough to feed all these people? There must be at least five thousand of them out there." the Disciples asked.

Now in Matthew's telling of this story, the Disciples could only scrounge up a couple of fish and a few loaves. Can't you just see them plopping it down in front of Jesus? But listen to what happened next: Matthew wrote,

<sup>19b</sup>"Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he (Jesus) looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."

Here is my point, when Jesus blesses there will be enough. Everyone ate and was filled. Moreover, they had twelve baskets of food leftover. Food just overflowed everywhere.

I take this miracle as a kind of parable about Jesus. Although they were in a deserted place, the deserted place burst forth in *divine abundance* once Jesus got there. There was healing for the hurting and food for the hungry.

But might it also not be a parable about his Disciples? And not just the Twelve, but about us also, his modern-day disciples? We look at the vast needs of our church, our community, and the world and in despair, we cry out to Jesus, "Lord, work some kind of miracle and take care of all our needs." "Jesus, send these needy people away! There won't be enough!"

Well, Jesus worked a miracle that day all right. And he delights in working them today, through us. This story is a parable about Jesus. And it's also a parable about us. In it, Jesus is asking us, "What do you have? What do you have that I can use to make a miracle happen?"

We say we don't have much. I think we say that because *we think* we don't have much. But in this story, Jesus was not concerned at all about what his Disciples *didn't* have. He wanted to know what they *did* have. Just a couple of fish in our basket, and a few loaves, we say, metaphorically. But we know that's not true.

We have to save for our children's education, and then for their weddings, and then for our own retirement, we say.

But the truth is, we live in an economy of abundance – even today during a pandemic. Yet we live as if we live in an economy of scarcity. Our hoarding these last few months is embarrassing.

Jesus urges us to take what we have and recklessly share it, give it away, and he says it will be enough. He promises it will be enough. He promises there will be more.

Perhaps its human nature. We come into this world with a sense of scarcity. Already, just out of the womb we learn to grab, hoard, accumulate, pile up, and guard. "It's mine and you can't have it," the little child so quickly learns to say.

The Jesse family has another family we've been hanging around with for a long time and they used to have two big Labradors. We've been there when it was feeding time and it is quite a spectacle. Each dog has its own bowl because they

don't understand the concept of sharing. The food barely hits the bowl and it is gobbled down. I've yelled at them to chew their food but they don't listen. I'm told that one reason why dogs gobble down their food so quickly is that for the first few million years when dogs lived in the wild, food was scarce. When a kill was made, all the dogs gathered around the carcass and wolfed down the meat. It was important to eat fast lest another dog got the food. So millions of years later, dogs are still gobbling down their food, even though there will always be more to eat.

- We better not let too many Mexicans into the country; they might take American jobs.
- Don't give too much to the folks on welfare; it might be a drain on the economy.
- Don't raise the minimum wage too much; it might make my hamburgers cost more.
- Life is a zero-sum game. If I give to you, I'll have less!

My wife Carol has always taught in inner-city school districts. What you may not know is that sometimes, oftentimes, the lesson in the lesson plan may or may not be the most urgent issue of the day.

- Maybe it's consoling a kid whose father got hauled away by the police the night before.
- Maybe it's feeding a child who came to school hungry because there was no one sober at home to get them breakfast.
- Maybe it's getting clean clothes for a kid who has come to school every day this week in the same dirty clothes.

Early in her career, teaching jobs were scarce and that is how she got started teaching in the inner-city. Teaching jobs are becoming more and more available. She could get a job in a better community. "But then who would love those kids?" she asks. Lots of folks burn out in a scenario like that, having nothing left to give. She's only been teaching poor kids for 25 years or so. Who knows how long she'll last but she has demonstrated to me that love and compassion are renewable resources. The more you give it away, the more you get. As someone said, in giving, you receive.

I've heard church members I admire say much the same about giving to the church. When asked about it they will always say, "Well, I've found that the more I give, the more I get." Do they mean to say that if you give money to the church, you will get more money back? No, what they mean is that in giving away some of their money for God's work, they had received great joy and satisfaction at being part of God's work – at living in the kingdom of heaven here and now – like I mentioned last week.

Back in the '80s, I worked in a manufacturing plant in North Carolina where we employed people younger than me who were part of the first integrated high school graduating class from the local school. It wasn't that long ago that African Americans only had menial, dead-end jobs. They were not allowed into the textile mills to work; never given the opportunity to advance into skilled and professional jobs. "If you let the blacks in here, they will take white jobs," the good ole white boys said to justify this economic injustice.

Before I moved there from the north, those of us who were being transferred down there were invited to a little symposium on the realities of life in the South. One presenter, an economist, displayed some statistics on the rather remarkable economic advances in the American South. One of us, looking at the graphs, noted a huge jump in the poor southern states' economies in about 1968. What happened, he asked?

"The Civil Rights Movement," said the economist. "We in the south were trying to fight with one hand tied behind our backs. When black people were allowed into the economy, the economy really started to boom."

When will we learn to trust Jesus? When will we learn some of his unrestrained, expansive, gracious lessons? When will we stop guarding, hoarding, keeping, and clutching and show the open-handed gesture of generosity? We come into this world with nothing and we quickly learn a sense of scarcity that doesn't exist in God's economy. But by the grace of God, we can learn another way. We can see that all that we have, and all that we are, is but a gift of an incredibly generous God who asks of us only that we respond to our sisters and brothers in the same gracious, generous spirit.

Imagine a world with no hunger because the nations who had the environment and the technology and the intelligence to produce did produce and did it in great abundance. Would there be riots over food trucks in Africa? Would there be a need to protect borders if everyone was fed? Would there be a need for nuclear weapons?

I know it's more complicated than that, but with Jesus all things are possible. And he chooses to work through us. He is asking us, "What do you have? What gifts have I first given you that you can return so that we can do great work together?"

We worship a God of *divine abundance*. God could feed all the starving people in the world if God wanted to. But then what would happen to our economy? Food prices would drop. In protest, farmers would drive their tractors into Washington. Grocery stores would go out of business. We would demand even more to make up for our losses in revenue.

But I suspect that matters little to God. I believe that if God fed all the starving people in the world, we would just get less compassionate and doing even less. "God will feed them" we would say.

But God is more interested in our conversion into the likeness of his Son, Jesus, and so God continues to bless us out of his *divine abundance*, so that we can be a blessing to others, just like Jesus did in the parable. He let the Disciples bless the people.

Sadly our problem is the same as that of the Disciples in the story. The commodity in shortest supply is not food or money; it's faith. How disappointed God must be that we never trust him to use us to deliver his grace.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Here's an idea. What if we would simply have the faith to trust God? Then God would use whatever we have, great or small, and multiply it like the fishes and the loaves in the story. And maybe then the greatest miracle that day might be the change that takes place in us!

## **Prayer**

Loving and gracious God, we give you thanks for your divine abundance. We are so blessed. And yet it has been pointed out to us today that our abundance is also our burden. Help release what you have first given us, so that we can receive the greater blessing of being a blessing to others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen