

You Give Them Something

Proper 13, Year A – Matthew

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 3, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

This morning's miracle story from Matthew's gospel is probably one of the best-known, most often recounted anecdotes from Jesus' ministry. If you're like me, you've probably known this story since you were knee-high to your Sunday School teacher. It's one of the most loved stories in the Gospels, too. Maybe that's *because* we learned it as children and associate it with the bright colored flannel-graph pictures, the smell of crayons and the sound of simple songs like, "Jesus loves me, this I know." Maybe it's because it's a story where Jesus' divine power and human compassion all spill together. Maybe it's because we're drawn by any story of someone making a little food go farther than our mothers could on the day before payday.

Whatever the reason, we are more than familiar with this story. I suspect that over the years you, like me, have heard all the angles to this story. But I'm going to have to leave most of that for some other time, a class or a Bible study or a class about Bible study or something.

Today's portion of the story of Jesus' ministry starts simply enough. Jesus is tired and discouraged. The Gospels are clear that Jesus, like the rest of us, needed time to get away, time to refresh and renew himself. Having just heard the tragic news of the execution of his cousin, the one we know as John the Baptist, Jesus needed some time to sort things out. He gets into a boat and heads to the other side of the lake. But the word has gotten out about the young worker of miracles. The crowds hear about where he is heading and flock from every town and village in the area to hear the rabbi teach, and maybe, just maybe, get close enough that he might touch them and heal their pain and their suffering. Even though he is tired and overwhelmed, Jesus sees the needy throng and he cannot turn them away. One after another, the people come, some on their own power, some carried by family or friends. One after another, after another, the people come, bringing their need, and their suffering, and their pain. One after another, after another, the people come, and Jesus heals them.

Finally, as the sun begins to sink low in the sky, the disciples come to Jesus and point out what they must have thought should be obvious. "We need to stop," they tell him. "We're in the middle of nowhere." "We need to get these people on their way so they can get back to their homes, or at least into the towns where they can get something to eat." It was a reasonable suggestion, considering the circumstances. There was a problem to be solved and any disciple worth his salt would think it his *duty* to offer such a sensible solution. But it isn't *Jesus's* solution. "Nooo..." he says, "they should stay." "*You* give them something to eat."

I'd *like* to think that I would have responded in some appropriately reverent fashion. But I'm afraid my response would have been more like, "Huh?" "You're kidding, right?" "All we have here is five loaves and..." Well, the rest of the story you know.

"*You* give them something to eat," Jesus told them. Why? If he was going to feed the throng with mere crumbs, why didn't Jesus just *do* it? Better yet, why not just say a word and turn the rocks into bread as he turned the water into wine? Why get the disciples all worked up here? Why get the disciples involved at all?

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is, of course, about Christ's human compassion and his divine power. This story is, of course, about God's bountiful providence. But this one sentence, this turning of Jesus to those closest to him and telling them, "*You* give them something," this isn't about thousands of hungry people. It isn't about bread and fish. It isn't about solving a particularly weighty problem of supply and demand. Jesus' command to the disciples is about *the disciples*, and therefore, it is about *us*. Jesus' command is about looking past the problem and seeing the opportunity to love and to serve. Jesus' command is about nothing less than who *we* are, and who we are *meant* to be.

“*You give them something.*” In spite of the verbosity and image overload we receive from just about every quarter in our consumer-oriented, consumption driven society, our purpose here, the meaning of our living, has nothing to do with filling our mouth, nothing to do with filling our hands, nothing to do with filling our pockets.

Nor is the central focus of our existence about filling the mouths, hands or pockets of *others*. Don’t get me wrong, one of the things that I love about being a part of this parish is that we are so involved in the business of helping others outside these red doors. There is no doubt that we *could* do more, but there is *absolutely* no doubt about the tremendous impact that St. Paul’s continues to make on the people of our community.

What is entirely *more* important, though, is to recognize the impact of this caring and giving... on *ourselves*. “*You give them something,*” Jesus said. The focus of Jesus’s message to the disciples on the side of that Galilean hill, and the focus of our very existence as human beings, created in God’s own image, is not full mouths, or hands, or pockets, it is not full bellies... but full *hearts*. Full hearts that reflect the love that God has for us. Full hearts that do what human hearts were created to do, return God’s love and spread it to each other. Full hearts that give glory to God in all that we do, and in all that *we are*.

“*You give them something.*” By heeding our Lord’s command, by giving from the fullness with which we have been blessed – not because we have to, or even because it is the “socially conscious” thing to do – by giving of ourselves *as* Christians – out of the overflowing fullness of God’s love in our hearts, our own condition is advanced far more than those we serve. By opening our heart to the possibility of touching another heart, open, by the way, to the possibility of being *broken* by another heart, our heart is the one that is changed into what we were always meant to be, conformed to the image of the one who has called us, and compelled us, and *commanded* us to loving service to one another.

“*You give them something.*” When we cease to see the poor and needy on the other side of the world, the downtrodden and oppressed on the other side of town, the harried and distressed on the other side of *this room*, as problems to be solved with our mission statements, or our programs, or our checkbooks. When, *instead*, we begin to respond with our *selves*, with genuine connection, one heart to another, with the love that Christ has given us so freely, so abundantly, *then* we become no less than what we were created to be in the first place: the bearers of Christ’s love to a whole wide world *still* waiting to experience it.

“*You give them something.*” It is a wonderful mission that Christ has given us – to become fully human... and fully *his*.