

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2020 Yr A
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Matthew 14:13-21

Have you ever appreciated how readily food is available to us? As I was reflecting on today's Gospel, I made a point this week of noting how many times I ate or snacked during the course of a day, and, let me tell you, it was eye-opening. I've always had what's called a "healthy appetite". I don't think I've encountered a meal that I didn't like or love. And I'm a joyous diner, I love good, fresh ingredients, well-seasoned dishes and a fabulous dessert can make an entire meal in my estimation. But as I tracked my eating habits, I noticed that it was so easy to reach for snacks, make sandwiches, order in, take out, or wait for Charles to make an amazing dinner. I was never in want. I am, for good or bad, well fed. Perhaps you have the same feeling – when we are well fed, we feel secure, we are nourished and most importantly, we can feel loved through being well fed and feeding others.

We all know the feeding of the 5,000 as one of Jesus' great miracles. How could Jesus take just two fish and five loaves and stretch them to feed that many people. We're in awe of all those leftovers and the idea that if there were about 5,000 men – not including women and children – how many people Jesus really must have fed at the end of that day.

But the disciples were there too. And while it's easy to focus on the size of the crowd and the lack of food and the great miracle Jesus performs, this time around I found myself focused on the disciples.

It had been a long day and the disciples were probably exhausted. They didn't know what to do with the crowds, and dinnertime was fast approaching. I imagine they thought Jesus would just take care of everything. Presto-chango-miracle. They must have been brought up short when Jesus says, "**You give them something to eat.**" I can see their mouths dropping as they start stuttering their excuses, but Jesus says, "**You give them something to eat.**" "What are you going to do about this hungry mass?" he challenges them.

Believe it or not, Jesus says the same things to us. "**You give them something to eat.**" As much as we wish it weren't true, Rhode Island is among the ten states with the highest rates of food insecurity. And the percentage of seniors who face the most severe levels of food insecurity is the highest in the country at 5.4%. "Food Insecurity" means not having the financial resources to feed yourself or your family. One in nine persons in Rhode Island does not have the financial resources to feed themselves or their families. One in nine. And let's not think that they live elsewhere. We have food insecure families in the East Bay, in Bristol. Perhaps someone you see every day is food insecure, or perhaps someone sitting amongst here today.

"**You give them something to eat.**" Just as each of us needs to be nourished, we are also called to nourish. Amazingly, Jesus doesn't say, I'll take care of it right now, guys. The miracle he

performs is not one of conjuring up a bottomless bag of money in order to go buy food for the masses. **“You give them something to eat,”** he says because in doing for one another we will encounter the God in them and in ourselves. And that God can only be revealed through relationships.

So, how are we feeding others, and how are we being fed? St. Michael’s does a wonderful job in providing funds to the East Bay Food Pantry and their Buy-a-Kid-a-Meal program. I’m glad that we have been able to support that program for years. But I also have a desire to work with others to feed others. So what do we do as a church in between the times we cut the East Bay Food Pantry a check? I’m not going to share with you all the entire results of the Renewal Works survey, but one thing really stood out to me and the facilitators when we reviewed them with the Renewal Works coach. More than anything else, people in this congregation wanted service opportunities. There are so many ways to unpack that piece of information, and we may not be clear on what that means for St. Michael’s yet, but that desire to do active, meaningful, relationship-building outreach is something I can work with. Laundry Love is a shining example of this, something borne out of a desire to serve others. The Harbor Treasures Pop-Up shop! I haven’t seen that many excited and engaged Episcopalians since Bishop Curry preached at the Royal Wedding! The intake volunteers were getting to know each other, laughing, thinking and strategizing. It was a bit of the Kingdom.

And there are a few of you who have already spoken to me about what a feeding program might look like, and what partnership in the community to combat food insecurity might look like. To that interest and energy, I give a resounding “Yes!”. Let’s heed what Jesus has to say. Let’s go feed our community – nutritionally, spiritually, and emotionally. In feeding we are fed, but that requires relationships, engaging others to help others.

Financial contributions will always be needed, and they make an important impact on many of these programs, but we’re Christians, and we are supposed to live a life modeled on Christ. And what Jesus is pointing out in today’s Gospel is that if we really are the disciples that we say we are, then the relationships with those on the margins, those who are food insecure, those who are homeless, jobless, grieving, sick, helpless, must be the focus of everything we do.

If we can’t be in relationship and serve others as a living expression of the Good News, then our checks and dollar bills, no matter the amount, are meaningless to our spiritual lives. We won’t establish relationships with others if we’re only dropping a dollar or two to buy a kid a meal without giving it a second thought or understanding why we need to actively help move families to a state of food security. St. Michael’s won’t establish transformational community relationships if we’re only writing checks to a social service agency to do the work we may be too proud to do ourselves. That is the Gospel truth.

We’re called to get our hands dirty, to look at people in our community in the eyes and understand the depth of suffering, shame and despair that grips the hopeless and the helpless. When we are simply a source of funding, we can’t do that. We can’t start to serve people in need if we don’t come together as a church and say “Here’s the problem. What does Jesus call

us to do?" Here's a hint, it's called Discipleship, and we need to start learning what that means again.

We don't have any excuses. We can't say that we don't have enough bread – whether that means time, or money; energy, willingness, or ability; faith, love, compassion, or whatever.

We have enough in the abundant grace of God and in the blessings we have in our lives. Don't wait for someone else to do it. Don't let someone just write checks on your behalf. Don't pretend you don't have the time or the skills or the resources to do God's work in the world. Don't listen to voices that say our parishioners have no motivation to serve actively, which I've heard a few folks in this parish say. Don't believe that you're not qualified or capable. Don't put it off for next month or next year or when it might be more convenient for you.

The body of Christ needs us. Now is the time to look into our mirrors and say to ourselves, **"You give them something to eat."** Amen.