

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)- Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes July 25, 2021

This week's Gospel passage is one that is familiar to all of us I expect. The miracle story of the feeding of those five thousand seekers on a hillside in Galilee is firmly fixed in our religious memories. This is the only miracle story that is found in all four Gospels and that is a sign of how important the message of this Gospel is for all of us. Even though we may have heard this lesson proclaimed many times, if you are like me, it still raises new questions and brings new insights with each retelling. The interchange between Jesus and the apostles is different in each Gospel but the generosity of that young boy who dared to offer his five barley loaves and two fish as the beginnings of a meal for thousands remains constant as do the actions of Jesus who makes of those simple loaves and fish a miracle meal for all.

The practical challenge that Jesus and his apostles faced that afternoon is easy to appreciate. It had been a long day and probably a long week. The press of the crowds and the burdens of teaching and healing and caring for and loving all those who were seeking Jesus must have been overwhelming for Jesus and the apostles. They were tired and they needed a break. They needed time for rest and time for prayer. Leaving the crowds behind, they crossed over the Sea of Galilee at a narrow spot and climbed up a mountain in hopes of finding the peace and quiet they longed for. Just when they began to settle in, Jesus raised his eyes and saw that large crowd heading right for them. I have to imagine the apostles were not too pleased at that sight. They were spent and they had had enough of taking care of those seekers. They probably wished they would just go away. They didn't have anything left that they thought they could give. But Jesus couldn't and wouldn't turn them away. Filled with compassion and concern, Jesus knew that all in that crowd were tired as well and that they were hungry

for both spiritual and material food to nourish their bodies and souls. This wasn't a case of not enough mashed potatoes for everyone at Thanksgiving dinner that could be solved discreetly. This was a real crisis. Something had to be done to feed that multitude right away. Jesus used that moment to teach the apostles and us about the abundance of God's grace and the miracles that can occur when we generously put in service what God has given to each of us to share with one another.

Many years ago, I witnessed a similar miracle of sorts. It was June 24, 1983. On that day, the doors of Freedom House, which was then located on West Grace street a couple of blocks from here, were to open at 5:00 p.m. for the first time to provide an evening meal for Richmond's homeless. After months of preparation, everything seemed ready and in order. Tables and chairs were in position. Food for the forty or so guests we expected had been donated and was being prepared. Volunteers and supporters were gathered anxiously waiting for the time to come for the meal to be served. There was an air of excitement in the house. A line of guests began to form outside around 3:00 and it looked like what we had dreamed of was finally going to happen. By 3:30, we began to get nervous as the line out back began to grow. At 4:15 or so, a quick estimate confirmed that the number in the line had already topped 100. Our little band of cooks and servers and doorkeepers really began to get scared at that point. What in the world had we done? How in the world were we going to feed that many guests? What were we thinking when we said we could do this? We gathered in prayer and the words of this Gospel

came to mind. We were making plans to try to stretch the food we had when a van from the Richmond Marriott pulled up in front of the building at about 4:35. The van was filled with leftover quiches, salad , and bread from an event at the hotel earlier that day. There was enough food to serve hundreds. The driver told us that they had heard of our plans to feed the homeless and that they could not bear to put the food to waste. What a miracle. Through the unexpected generosity of the hotel, the first ever evening meal at Freedom House featured quiche, salad and bread for the 160 or so guests who came to dinner that night. All who ate had their fill and yes there were lots of leftovers that were sent along with the guests as they left for the night. What a testament to God's amazing grace. What a powerful witness to the miracle that can occur when we share what we have been given in service to others. That first act of charity by the Marriott Hotel was repeated countless times over the years by restaurants, bakeries, grocery stores, churches, congregations, families and individuals who faithfully followed that example and contributed food to feed the hungry of Richmond for over thirty years. That one unexpected act of generosity began a tradition of generosity that engaged thousands in service to the poor of Richmond.

In the Gospel story, it took just the same type of naïve generosity from that young boy to set the stage

for that amazing miracle. What Philip deemed an economic impossibility when Jesus asked him to provide food for the multitude became possible when Andrew found that young boy and led him to Jesus. No words are spoken by that boy in the Gospel. He let his actions speak for him. Without any urging, he offered up his lunch and dinner- five barley loaves, which was the food of the poor of that day, and two small pickled fish, likely no larger than sardines. The boy gave all that he had without reservation. Jesus did the rest. Jesus took the boy's offering, blessed it, offered it to the Father and went among the people and distributed the food to the entire crowd. The Gospel tells us that by God's grace those few loaves and fish became enough to feed the entire multitude gathered on that hillside. They had all that they could eat and there were still twelve baskets of fragments left over. What a miracle. For centuries, many have wondered how it came to pass that the 5,000 were able to be fed from those five loaves and two fish. Some have suggested that this miracle was intended to teach the apostles and all followers of Christ about the amazing abundance of God's grace and about the miracles that can occur when we share with others the gifts and blessings we have been entrusted to us by God. Others suggest that this lesson is intended to remind us that God always provides all that we need. Still others

suggest that the real miracle lies in the possibility that , having witnessed the generosity of that naïve young boy who gave all that he had to Jesus, the crowd reached into their own hearts and into the folds of their clothing and pulled out and shared with all the secret food that each was carrying for their own consumption. Perhaps the most important lesson is about the Eucharist, the holy meal by which we are all nourished and fed through the inexhaustible love and mercy of Christ. When we gather here for the sacrifice of the Mass, we come here hungry for the spiritual nourishment found in the Eucharist we share. We offer to the Lord our humble gifts of bread and wine, symbols of our entire selves and a return to God of all that we have. As Christ commanded, those humble gifts are placed on the altar, blessed, consecrated, broken and poured out and become the very body and blood of Christ to nourish and sustain us. God makes of what we offer all that we could ever need. Nourished by the bread of life, we are sent forth to bless and serve the world.

The lessons from today's Gospel are many and profound. We do well I think to make those lessons part of our lives. This week let's try to remember some of what we have heard and learned. Jesus teaches us that It is always the right time for a miracle. Like that young boy, each of us really does have a part to play in making miracles happen. As Mary taught us, nothing is impossible for God. We must never turn

away those who may be hungry for food or for faith. We need to remember that God has provided to each of us all that is necessary for miracles to occur if we just put to use what we have been given. God will take care of the rest. With God, there is always enough. In the end, everything we offer to God matters. Little is always much in the hands of Christ. And most important of all, we learn that If we follow Jesus, if we are faithful to the Gospel and turn away from sin and if we are faithful recipients of the Eucharist, we will never be hungry again and we will have all we need to make miracles happen and change the world.