

## **Pentecost 8/Lectionary 17B**

July 26, 2009

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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2 Kings 4:42—44    Psalm 145:10—19    Ephesians 3:14—21    **John 6:1—21**

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Today's Gospel lesson from the book of John begins a five-week series in which we will explore Jesus as the "Bread of Life." This sixth chapter of John is full of such imagery.

The feeding of the 5,000 in the Gospel of John takes place well into Jesus' ministry. He is attaining a great degree of notoriety, as we heard in last week's Gospel. Everywhere he goes, people follow, looking for another miracle.

On this particular day, the crowd remained at sunset. The people grew hungry. Jesus realized that feeding the people with physical food is at least as important as feeding them with spiritual food.

When we read miracle stories, such as the multiplying of bread in today's Old Testament lesson and in the Gospel of John, we tend to get hung up on the miracle itself. This is understandable – miracles are, by definition, extraordinary events. Miracles draw our attention away from the ordinary details of life.

But if all our attention is focused on the miraculous, perhaps we miss the significance of other, seemingly ordinary things going on in the story. What lessons can we take away from the seemingly ordinary parts of these stories? I think there's something to be learned in these ordinary happenings. Perhaps we should give attention to the ordinary in this story, as well as the extraordinary.

For instance, if we focus on the miraculous in today's Gospel story, we might miss what's going on with one of the main characters in this story. This character has no lines in this story; he only receives a passing mention. But he's vitally important. I'm talking about the young boy, the one who offers his five loaves and two fish.

One can easily imagine this little boy, standing on the fringes of the group, and overhearing Jesus' conversation with Philip. Jesus asks a seemingly simple question: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

You can just picture this little boy think proudly to himself, “I’ve got bread! Here, take mine!” He runs and tells Andrew, “Here, you can take my food.” This little boy, in his youthful innocence, offers up everything he has. Andrew graciously acknowledges the boy’s offer, but turns and says to Jesus, “What are they among so many [people]?”

I sometimes wonder if this little boy didn’t “get it” better than Andrew did. Did this youngster, in the innocence and trust of youth, somehow better understand Jesus’ simple question? Did he understand that Jesus could take whatever meager gifts he had to offer, and turn them into so much more? Something ample enough to feed even a multitude?

For me, this simple exchange between the little boy and Andrew opens a completely new world of understanding in this text. It begins by Jesus asking a seemingly simple question: How can we feed all these people?

Or is it such a simple question? Is it not possible that this is a question with several possible meanings, and several possible answers?

On the one hand, Philip perceived the question in a very literal sense. How are we to physically buy enough food to feed so many people? “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”<sup>1</sup>

But on the other hand, Philip and the disciples had yet to grasp the true meaning of Jesus, the true meaning which defies an easy answers. He failed to see that there was possibly a deeper level of meaning to Jesus' simple question than merely satisfying physical needs. Philip failed to see that Jesus was more than a simple miracle worker. Jesus could do so much more than physically feed people; Jesus was one who was also capable of satisfying spiritual hunger.

I'd like to tell you a story about how Jesus Christ has the power to take whatever meager gifts we have to offer, and turn them into something which can satisfy both physical and spiritual needs. The situation may seem hopeless – like how to feed over 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish – yet this man Jesus has the power to do it.

In 1992, my husband, John Mark, was released from active duty in the Army. We had not expected this. His whole life's goal was to serve in the Army. But with only three months' notice, we were civilians once again.

My husband's transition into the civilian workforce was complicated by the fact that we had been living in Germany until about two weeks before his separation from active duty. We had little opportunity to find housing or a new job for him. We did as many people in similar situations have done. After seven years of marriage, we went back home to live with Mom and Dad.

Despite the fact that we had a roof over our heads and food enough to eat, this was one of the blackest periods in our life together. We spent endless days working away at John Mark's job hunt in the little room his parents had set aside for us.

Very quickly, this little room became like a prison to me. That was not our home we were living in – it was John Mark's parents' home. While John Mark helped his father on the farm, I had no responsibilities in the home. I slipped into depression. Each day that passed without my John Mark getting a job drove me deeper into the pit of despair.

The only thing John's parents would let me do around the house was to split the grocery shopping and expenses. In an effort to make our saving stretch further, I became an avid coupon clipper. I would spend hours every week clipping coupons from every source I could find – newspapers, magazines, any place I could find them.

But as any coupon-clipper will tell you, there's just no way you can use them all. Many of them are for products you never use, or for items your store doesn't carry. And, some expire and can't be used.

So, I was sitting on the bed one day culling out all the coupons we couldn't use, getting ready to through them out. Then I remember that when we had been with the Army in Germany, we could use coupons the military grocery store that were up to six months past the printed expiration date. And, I knew the great need among younger military families. Many of them had had to use Food Stamps just to get by, back here in the States. But since there was no Food Stamp program for American military families overseas, many of these people lived in poverty, not having adequate food to eat.

Then one simple question went through my mind: Rather than throw these coupons I can't use out, why don't I send them to the community services center back at our post in Germany? Maybe somebody there can use them.

This was such a simple question, wasn't it? But what began with one simple question quickly snowballed into something bigger than even I could have imagined. Looking back now, I still can't believe it.

I told the members of a social club we had recently joined about what I was doing. They had been looking for a community service project, and they thought this sounded easy. A few months later, when I was reporting on our chapter's charitable activities to a regional gathering of this club, other chapters wanted to participate as well. And the Overseas Coupon Project – or, OCP for short – was born.

Seventeen years ago, I could not have imagined the tens of thousands of people who would eventually contribute to the OCP, or the multitude of American military families overseas who would benefit from our efforts. But this much I have learned – God was able to take whatever meager gifts I could offer, and make something grand of it.

In that single instant, with that simple question, God gave my life new meaning. God opened up to me that the world is bigger than me and my immediate problems. God showed me that there are people out there who need what meager gifts I can offer, even if it is only a small handful of coupons.

God was able to take those meager gifts, and just like the loaves and fishes, to multiply them in the lives of others. The people we helped with our coupons were able to make their food budgets stretch a little further. Perhaps they were not living the abundant life I would have wished for them, but at least those people had food sufficient to their needs.

In this simple act of offering whatever meager gifts I had to bring, I could not have imagined how I, too, would be blessed. I was blessed every time I received letters from coupon contributors, telling me what a difference the OCP had made in their lives. I was told about a special needs class in California where the teacher used the OCP to teach her children skills such as cutting and sorting. I was blessed when I received a letter from a social studies teacher in Florida who told me she used the OCP to teach her children about all the countries in the world where her classes' coupons were sent. I was blessed when I heard from a retirement home in Texas where the residents were glad to learn that they could still give something back to the community.

When all this began, if I had stopped to question how it would be possible for me to help feed so many people, I would probably have responded like Philip. I would have seen the magnitude of the problem – how can I possibly help feed thousands of people living in poverty? I would have said that feeding this multitude is beyond my capacity. But thanks be to God that, instead, I responded with the simplicity of the little boy, and without a thought offered up all that I had to give. I learned that it may be beyond my capacity to feed thousands of people, but it is not beyond God’s ability.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus performed miracles so that the people would see and believe. The ongoing miracle for believers today is that God continues to actively work in the world. Although God could accomplish His task in this world without our help, for some reason we can’t understand, God chooses *US* to accomplish His will in the world. God uses us, in all our brokenness and humanity, to accomplish what He will for the world.

An author once wrote: “Anything God has ever done at any time, He can do now. And, anything God has ever done anywhere, He can do here. Furthermore, anything God has ever done in and through anyone, He is prepared to do through you.”<sup>2</sup>

There is so much work yet to be done in our hurting world. Too many people die of starvation every day. Too many people live in poverty, with inadequate housing. Too many people hardly have a scrap of clothing to wear. Too many people don't know the Good News. Too many people have never been fed with this living bread we call Jesus Christ.

God needs you to continue working in this world. While God could do it without you, He chooses you to be His hands, feet, and mouth. While you may feel you have nothing to offer, I encourage you to respond like the little boy in today's story. Never discount the gifts you have to offer. Offer up your loaves and fish into God's service. God can take whatever you have to offer, no matter how meager, and make something special of it.

Let us pray: Our gracious Heavenly Father, I ask for your blessing on the members of this congregation. Help them to see opportunities for your work in this world. Help them to attend to these opportunities to physically and spiritually feed their neighbors. For we are able to do these things only because we have first been fed by the true bread of life, Jesus Christ, in whom we live and breathe, and who makes all things possible. Amen.

[2,064 words]

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:7

<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer in Jerry Wiles, *The Faithful Witness* (Houston: Halcyon Press, 2001), xiv.