

A Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost - July 26, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

By David Knight, Interim Rector

In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Gospels abound in the miracles of Jesus. Today's gospel reading tells us about his miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and his walking on the water. Imagine what it must have been like on that mountain for Jesus and his disciples as they had gone away in the hope of having some quiet time apart from the crowds. As they began to settle on a grassy spot for some quiet Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward. I certainly can imagine what he must have been thinking. It had already been a long day. While he knew what he knew already what he was going to do, he still asked Philip, "Where are we going to get enough for these people to eat? Then Andrew, one of his disciples said, "Hey, there's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they among all these people. Meanwhile the crowd kept pouring in and around them. Jesus knew human nature well. He knew that an excited, milling crowd was unmanageable. He said to his disciples, "Make the people sit down." It was sign of true understanding of human nature as he invited the people to sit down. A quiet came over them as they waited for what Jesus was about to say or do. With the crowd on their feet agitated, milling around that would not have been possible. My wife has a wonderful way when her little students are wild. She simply lowers her voice and that calm down!

That moment when Jesus told the anxious crowd to sit down reminds me of some choice moments early in my parish ministry at St. Paul's Holyoke, Massachusetts where I started out as an assistant in this large parish. The rector, soon after my arrival, went away on sabbatical. I was fresh out of seminary with all kinds of newly gained knowledge and was anxious to try ideas out on the parish. In the rector's absence, I was to work closely with the parish administrator, a wonderful soul named Paul Buckwalter, who was a retired president of the National Blank Book Company. He was a very wise man. Etched in my brain is the memory of my bursting into his office one morning with a grand idea, perhaps a grandiose idea of something I thought the parish should be doing. While I was not a crowd of five thousand like the crowd in this morning's gospel, I was sufficiently animated if not agitated and I was on my feet as I began to describe my case to Paul. Etched in my brain as well was the look on Paul's

face as he looked at me as I paced back and forth in his grand office. Paul had a very strong countenance and a strong yet compassionate face, and he knew how to handle people with skill. When he looked at you, he had a way of looking through you! He said, "Sit down, David." After a pause he said in a calm voice, "Now, tell me, what's on your mind." The setting became right for a quiet conversation. I was a milling crowd of one pressing forward to speak to Paul Buckwalter. He made me sit down and in so doing, we could have a fruitful discussion. What I remember about that occasion in Paul's office was that he knew well how to handle me, but more than that, I experienced his compassion as he was perfectly willing to listen to what I had to say once I had become relaxed and calm in his presence.

Jesus said to his disciples, make that crowd of people sit down. The people sat down. He then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks for those small pieces of fish and bread, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost."

I want to speak this morning to what is truly a miracle, one to which you and I can relate. We can try as we might to explain how turning enough bread and fish from a few small morsels to enough to feed thousands of people, but we cannot relate to that. Any attempt to do that obscures the true meaning of the miracle. What is truly miraculous in biblical terms is not that a seeming human, that is, Jesus, could multiply loaves and fishes in so astounding a manner, but that this truly human being could represent, by his words and deeds, such a sign of hope and healing that hundreds, if not thousands of people would be able to come to him and have an experience of peace. They would follow him from place to place. Their hunger for hope was met in this man who had such compassion. By his compassion they would come to discover that they could have the strength to pass through things temporal and face the things eternal.

Today's Gospel once again points to the miracle of Holy Communion and how you and I are fed and given hope in the midst of all that life brings. The miracle on that mountainside that evening was that those who came to be in the presence of Jesus experienced his compassion in such a way that their hunger was fed, their spirits were calmed and they were able to return to their homes that night refreshed. Often, in times such as this, we read the words, "And Jesus had compassion for them." In essence, what Jesus did for that crowd of tired, hungry, people who came to him, many of whom had heavy burdens on their hearts, was to give them the sacrament of his loving and healing grace which was enough to give them hope. While we acknowledge that Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper the night before his crucifixion, yet is not his feeding of the people on that grassy place on the mountainside a foretaste of the heavenly banquet which we experience at a celebration of the Holy Eucharist?

Then, imagine what it must have been like to be out in that boat later on and have the wind come up and be fearful. Then, suddenly it is as if someone was walking on the surface of the stormy water coming toward them. As the account goes, they went down to the sea, got into a boat and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat. At first they were frightened but then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached land. What is truly miraculous is not that someone could walk on the surface of the water without sinking but rather that his presence among ordinary, insecure, people could calm their anxieties and could cause them to walk where they could not walk before, that his presence can help you and me when we find that we are sinking from being overwhelmed.

The great miracle that we can take from today's Gospel is that Jesus never, ever, abandons us. In his unwavering compassion he meets us where we are, invites us to bring to his Table our deepest needs, fears, worries—whatever it is that burdens our hearts and our souls and our minds. This sacrament of Holy Communion is a miracle itself, for in it Jesus brings to us hope and healing. And part of the miracle is that it so often happens before us in our very midst when we least expect it. So as you come to God's table this morning, bring with you your burdens, yes, your worries and your fears. The true miracle is that your hunger will be met by the One who gives us the Bread of Life from which we then can receive the strength to face with hope those things that we will encounter in our path before us this week. *Amen..*