

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 13  
St. Ann's Episcopal Church, Old Lyme, CT  
August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008  
Isaiah 55:1-5  
Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21  
Romans 9:1-5  
Matthew 14:13-21

### ***SERMON***

If we deleted the parables and the miracle stories from the Gospels, we wouldn't have much left to read on Sunday morning during the time of Pentecost. The parables and the miracles are essential parts and pieces of the Gospels. They are how we receive insights into the kingdom of God. The parables often begin with the statement, "The kingdom of God is like..." and then the comparison, the simile is offered: mustard seed, three measures of wheat, and so forth.

These word pictures are the best that can be done for us. We cannot absolutely and accurately, definitively and clearly define and describe the kingdom of God. It is beyond our human ability to completely comprehend or describe what God's kingdom is like. We can get close. We can get hints. That's what the parables do—they do what they can with words.

It is also what the miracles do. The miracles do with actions what the parables do with words. For many years we got hung up on trying to make sense out of the miracles. We tried to rationalize them. We were determined to make the miracles fit into our scientific understanding of the physics and chemistry of how the world works. We lost sight of the simple notion that the miracles weren't performed to mystify and amaze us, or for our amusement. They were, like the parables were words, actions that were taken to give us insights into the kingdom of God: parables and miracles, words and actions

The author of Matthew's Gospel did not include the miracle of the loaves and fishes to persuade us that Jesus had the ability to incredible, magical acts and deeds that defy the rules, regulations, and principles that guide and guard our precious understanding of science. This miracle and the others that are included in the Gospels are there to inform us what the kingdom of God is like, and how the world in which we live is different from the kingdom, so that we will respond to God's call to us to be partners in bringing the kingdom in.

Keep in mind that it is God's hope as well as our hope that the day will come when we no longer need parables and miracles to help understand the differences between the kingdom and the world. It is God's hope and our hope that kingdom and world will be undifferentiated. We pray for it every day, many times a day: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The disciples were concerned that there wasn't enough. According to their reckoning, five loaves and two fishes was insufficient to feed the great crowd that had gathered around Jesus to hear what the kingdom of God is like. The disciples were guided by a well-accepted worldly understanding of economics. Resources are finite. There is only so much and it might not be enough for me. Therefore, we have to be careful in allotting what there is: that is Portion Control economics.

Jesus has a different understanding of economics. This is the kingdom of God and there is abundance. There is enough for everyone if we act together to be sure that everyone gets a fair

share. We cannot be reckless or greedy—we can't use up all the petroleum resources selfishly, for instance. It is this understanding of economics that the Gospel underwrites and that, for instance, the church's Millennium Development Goals respond to.

So here, in this story of the five loaves and two fish we are confronted with two separate economic theories: portion control and abundance. When we say in our prayers, "Thy kingdom come," what we are asking is that we be daring enough, faithful enough to resist controlling the portions that we divvy up with the world, and trust strongly enough in God's generosity and grace to live into the abundance which the Lord has provided.

Keep an eye out and you will see this discussion about portion control and abundance happening all the time and in many places. At Vanderbilt University, the Divinity School's Refectory was the most favorite cafeteria on campus. Students from all the different colleges, Law, Nursing, Business, Arts and Sciences, joined us for our meals there for one reason. The guiding principle of the chief cook and head administrator was the Gospel norm that we've been discussing: Abundance.

Maxine was her name and she was never fearful of running out. It wasn't because she cooked too much or was sloppy in her preparations—it was simply that operated out of the understanding of God's abundance. As you can imagine the university administrators were often fit to be tied when they would come through the line and receive a larger-than-policy portion of mashed potatoes and meat loaf. They'd dig out their calculators, digital thermometers, and measuring spoons, and after they'd finished all their calculations they'd write of a memo of admonition to be put in Maxine's personnel file.

The Administration didn't dare fire Maxine. The Refectory was the only profitable cafeteria on the campus. And it was profitable because the food was good and, even more important, because the food was abundant. Now, Maxine didn't work there everyday. When she had her days off, Mary was in charge, and the administration loved Mary. In her yellow smock with her paper hairnet and her plastic sanitary gloves, Mary had her portion control tools at the ready when you came down the line. Scoop: One half cup of green beans. Scoop: Two thirds of a cup of mashed potatoes. Scoop: two tablespoons of brown gravy. Scoop: five ounces of meatloaf, Mary was a portion control marvel. And she never smiled.

On some of the bulletin boards around the campus, there was a flyer that was titled "Maxine's & Mary's Schedule." It told tale the tale. The days that Maxine would be dispensing abundance and the days that Mary would be maintaining portion control. You can guess that the Maxine days were crowded and the Mary days scarce.

A huge crowd had gathered to hear Jesus talk about the kingdom of God and its abundance. The miracle of the loaves and fishes is encouragement for us to live into that abundance that we pray for; the kingdom has come when we open our hearts and souls to the presence of God and live in the way that the parables and the miracles demand.

We come into this world with a sense of scarcity, a determination to hold on to what we have in case someone else might get a piece of it. By the grace of God and faith in his generosity we can learn to live a better way. We can see that all that we have and all that we are is but the gift of an incredibly gracious God who asks us only that we respond to our sisters and brothers in that same gracious and generous spirit that God has shown to us.

Here in the Church we tell with great love the story of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. All too often we fail to take the story into the way we live. A great crowd was hungry. They could have been set off to fend for themselves. But Jesus chose to live into the abundance

of the kingdom, and, having thanked God for his generosity he shared the sustenance with all those who were with him, and there was enough left over: Abundance.

Jesus took the little bit that some had offered and fed a multitude. He made real the kingdom understanding of God's love for all. When we act like kingdom people who believe in abundance not people of the world determined to control the portions, the kingdom of God has broken through and our prayer, "Thy kingdom come..." has been answered.

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