

“True Power”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
10th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12B) – 28 & 29 July 2018
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

The feeding of the 5,000 is a miracle so familiar to us that we almost have to work on being amazed and excited by it yet again. It’s just everywhere. In fact, it is the only miracle recounted in all four gospels, and Matthew and Mark liked it so much that they each feature it twice, for a total of 6 times this story gets told.

Contrast this with the story of Jesus’ birth, which Mark and John completely ignore, or the establishment of the Lord’s Supper, an event John doesn’t bother describing. There were plenty more awesome miracles, too, that Jesus performed that certainly deserve attention, like transforming water into wine, an Episcopal favorite found only in John.

So why, when the gospel writers differ so significantly in how they chose to tell the story of Jesus, do all four seem compelled to include this miraculous feeding? Perhaps they saw within this miracle a prime, indispensable, multifaceted way of gleaning insight about who Jesus was and what he was up to. Certainly, we can draw many conclusions, come up with many reasons why this story is treated as so special.

We can easily perceive how Jesus felt compassion for the hungry crowds who followed him seeking healing. He wanted to show how he nourishes people and brings them fullness of life, how his presence brings order to chaos, how his power can create an abundance that overwhelms scarcity. We can also see the multiplication of loaves and fish as a metaphor for how our spiritual poverty can be enriched, our spiritual hunger sated, when we dwell in the presence of Jesus.

Or we could look at the 5,000 being fed as a precursor to the Lord's Supper, or a foreshadowing of the heavenly banquet for faithful disciples who walk in the pathway of renewed, resurrection life.

We can view it as a statement on social justice, of how Christ and his followers, people like us, bear responsibility to lift up the lowly, to advance, as liberation theologians put it, "preferential option for the poor."

Or we can focus on certain details, like how Jesus tested Philip, and translate it as a challenge for us to unleash our imaginations and perceive reality as having much greater "breadth and length and height and depth" than we ever thought possible.

We can zoom in on how the crowds tried to make Jesus King, a movement from which he fled, because his kingship is not of this world, not limited or exploitative or violent, but free and self-sacrificing and peaceful. From this we can glean a warning to guard against the temptation to force Jesus into a mold of our own making where we can manipulate and control him.

There's so much meaning embedded in the miracle that it sometimes feels like drinking out of a fire hose, and I believe that all of these interpretations carry valid meaning. We don't have to choose one over the others. Each gospel writer included the event to help develop their own way of convincing people that Jesus is the only real hope for the transformation of our lives and our world. At the same time, the four gospels show how a single event can be understood in many ways, which reveals an inspired and living Word whose truth cannot be exhausted by a single reading, but which always yields up new insights into God's purposes and how we are meant to respond to His generous grace with humble gratitude and action.

But if I had to choose, and I do, because everyone's patience has its limits, I'd invite us to focus on how the miraculous feeding reveals the true power of Jesus' love to fill us with "abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

We live in an era where truth is becoming increasingly scarce, or at least hard to discern, assaulted as it is by lies and deception, alternative facts and realities, ridiculous conspiracy theories, echo chambers we create by listening only to those perspectives that agree with our own. And all of it's fostered by a wonderful technology that's obscenely prone to abuse, that inundates us with more information and opinions than we could possibly process. It's disorienting and frightening, this ever-shifting landscape where simply finding our bearings can prove exhausting.

We dwell in a world where power, concentrated in the hands of a very few, has become warped and corrupted to the point where it consistently fails to serve the common good. We often feel powerless, injured and afraid. We suffer hatreds and imprecations that dehumanize and demonize. Enraged by the presumption of privilege and superiority some claim, enraged by the insults and humiliations and dangers we face, we sometimes succumb to the temptation to give as good as we get and seek a vengeance which belongs to God alone, abandoning our covenant, forsaking the command to love, because love seems so impractical, even though love and love alone gives us the power to overcome and forgive and live in peace.

We often feel empty, hollowed out, broken by unreasonable demands and cruel expectations foisted upon us by others and by our own insecure selves. Judged without remorse, we sometimes feel shamed and worthless, devoid of a sense of purpose, our very identities called into question and threatened, our imaginations crimped so tightly that our vision of what is possible dims with every passing day.

Into this madness, into this sickness and dis-ease, comes the healing power of Jesus, bearing and sharing an abundant – indeed, a limitless – love like none other, a fount of hope that washes away despair, inspires courage, and bestows strength to endure.

Into this confusion and chaos comes the shining light of God's truth piercing the darkness, dispersing the shadows of falsehood, restoring faith and meaning, liberating our imaginations to envision how we, through grace and mercy, may with patience restore sanity and kindness and wholeness to a world that seems intent on ripping itself apart, a world that seems relentlessly devoted to shredding people simply for the sheer pleasure of it.

Into this void comes the source of fulfillment that never fades, that feeds the hungry, body and soul, with plenty to spare, and his name is Christ Jesus, triumphant over evil and death in all of its guises, pouring out life abundant to all who trust and follow him, reaching out for the lost and forsaken, and denying none – denying none who desire a better life, a better world.

And we the people God, filled with the Holy Spirit, “filled with all the fullness of God”; we, commissioned by water and word, sustained by bread and wine; we, blessed by the experience of Christ alive in us, are called to witness “the power at work within us” “able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” Answering that call brings joy to us and others, hope for the future, peace in the present, a veritable miracle for a world starving for the truth of the good news. Amen.