



Inadequacy

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Eighth Sunday after Pentacost ~ July 26, 2009*

John 6:4-15

Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, 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.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

One of the worst feelings in the world is that of inadequacy. Finding ourselves in a situation and knowing that we simply don't have the experience, the wisdom, or the resources to successfully navigate it. Think back to the first day of school butterflies, the awe, joy and terror of being a parent for the first time, the thrill and fear of a job promotion- "Wow- this is just what I have always wanted" mixed with "How am I ever going to do this?"

I would imagine this sense of inadequacy was exactly what the disciples felt as they encounter this hungry hoard of people following Jesus. Imagine standing there, with 11 or so of your buddies and a strange man who granted had pulled off some pretty spectacular things, but, this was maybe beyond his ability...standing there -facing this crowd- on the side of a mountain, far from any homes or take out joints. A huge crowd- restless, excited, some probably along to see this so-called wonder worker fall flat on his face. Children crying. People pushing to get a better view. How in the world are we going to cope with this one, Jesus, they must have been thinking. And probably hoping that Jesus would either make the crowd go away or would pull off some new miracle. Pretty much what we often think when faced with something large and overwhelming- make it go away God, or you'd better fix this, God-do some kind of miracle (although I think what we really mean by miracle is magic).

Of course, that is not quite how God works. There is no "miracle button" we can push and God will just respond instantly and magically. In his book, *A Gift of Light*, Father Andrew writes, "Human's crude idea of God is that God is a sort of millionaire with the power to bring about miracles, who just does what God wants, when God likes and how God likes without any thought for economy of care for detail. But, if we look at our Lord's way of acting, we find two characteristics about him -continuity and care. He takes what is and lifts it up to something higher, and he never wastes anything. When he was confronted by a hungry multitude, he did not say, "I am God and I will send down manna to them." He said to the Apostles, "If you will give what you have wholly to me, we can feed the multitude." He took what they had and blessed and broke it and the multitude was fed" (Father Andrew, *A Gift of Light*, Morehouse-Barlow, 1968).

One of the clear things we can see in Jesus' reaction to the hungry crowd is that he squarely faces reality rather than attempting to go around a problem. He does not attempt to get rid of the crowd or do a disappearing act, leaving them to themselves. Rather he knows he is deeply involved in the event and he stays and works through and with what is, not what he might want. Jesus knew, and we who know his story should know, that good news often comes through and by facing up to bad news. We can't wish or hope a difficult situation away; we have to deal with it.

Which brings me to the second thing we see in this story and that we need to remember; whenever we feel inadequate, overwhelmed, especially then, we need to bring whatever we have to God, however pathetic and inadequate it may seem to us. Jesus helps the disciples avoid panic by directing them to survey the resources at hand- they come up with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, which certainly did not seem to be sufficient, did not seem to be enough to make everyone calm down and know that all would be well, but actually turned out to be more than enough. So rather than focus on what they did not have at hand, Jesus helped them focus on what they did have at hand. Rather than focus on what was going against them, he helped them focus on what was going for them.-even if that was just 5 meager loaves and 2 smelly fish.

And then, then he decisively acted. He took what was at hand, thanked God for it, and without anxiety or panic, did what needed to be done- he fed the crowd. He did the best he could with what he had- and because of that, everything changed and the situation was redeemed. Jesus knew without a doubt that wherever there was plenty of God there would be plenty of everything else. Jesus knew that the impossible can sometimes be quite possible. And as he began to act, to do what seemed impossible, his action gathers strength from all directions. And what seems like certain disaster turns into a celebration – a feast.

The truth, as Garrison Keiller has pointed out, is that we are not all called to be above average. We are not called to be brilliant, to know all the answers, to be beyond adequate for every situation we face, Often our resources are quite limited- often they are smelly little fish. And we are embarrassed and hesitant to hold them up- to offer them. But that is exactly what happened to create that amazing feast. Nor are we called to always be in control. The story of the feeding of the 5 thousand is not about adequacy or capacity at all, it is about attitude. Specifically an attitude of thanksgiving, of gratitude. We are called to move from seeing only impossibility, scarcity and fear, to seeing abundance and living out of a sense of plenty.

As Jesus demonstrates throughout the Gospel stories, he knew that life is about confronting reality head on- being honest with and about ourselves and our situations, and then dealing decisively and directly, and out of deep gratitude. Jesus had no illusions that life was supposed to be easy and conflict free. And that freed him to focus all his energy on the challenges he faced rather than trying to escape the inescapable.

How could he do that? Well, the smart aleck answer is that he was divine. But I think the deeper truth is found in Jesus' initial action on receiving the bread- he looks up to heaven and he gives thanks to God for what he has. And that changed everything. When gratitude is the ground of life, life looks different. We find our eyes opened to the resources that do exist- knowing that there is always something that can be used, can help. No matter how great the problem, how deep the crisis, God has not left any situation without its 5 loaves and 2 fish- there is always something in any situation we can use, build on. There is always something to be grateful for - and gratitude is one way to have our eyes opened to what is already present, right in front of us.

Rather than wringing our hands over whatever is distressing us, may we always give thanks to God for what we have and may we have the courage to act, to use the gifts we have been given. May our eyes always be open to the abundant resources we have. Everything we need has indeed already been given us. May we recognize that, feel deep gratitude to God, and have the grace to live into and out of that gratitude.