

You do it, and I will be with You

Mark 6:30-44

July 23, 2006

I.

Today's reading from Mark reminds me of the story of the salesman who had an important call to make on a potential new customer the next day, and so he set his alarm for 6:00 to give himself enough time.

He was anxious about the interview, woke up five minutes early, and saw the clock said 5:55. That was close enough, so he got up and started to get ready. He turned on the television just in time to hear the station identify itself as channel five. And then he looked at his calendar and realized the date was May 5. In the back of his mind he started to become more attuned to the number five.

After he got ready he looked at his schedule to review the information about the company he was going to visit. He remembered that its name was Five Star Industries, and noticed that its address was 555 5th Street. Then he got to the building, looked on the building directory, and saw the company's offices were on the 5th floor. This was getting a little strange; perhaps a good omen, he thought.

He walked in the office, and was told that his meeting would be in five minutes in the fifth office on the right. The presentation went well and the company said it would make a decision in five days. By this time the number five was starting to loom very large.

Leaving the building the fellow saw a coffee shop across the street called "The Five Minute Break." Somebody must be trying to tell me something, he thought. So he went in and sat down in a booth, and noticed that a newspaper had been left on the table, and it was open to the racing form on the sports page.

His eye just happened to catch the fact that a horse named "Five Spot" was running in the fifth race at the local track, and the odds were 5:1.

Well, this was more than he could resist. He quickly left the coffee shop, caught a cab for the track, ran up to the \$50 window, and bet \$500.

Wouldn't you know that he got to his seat five minutes before post time, the race was run, and Five Spot finished—fifth!

The moral of this story is that sometimes things are not as they seem. It can be easy to draw the wrong conclusion from what otherwise seem to be compelling circumstances. In the context of our faith, we easily can have our own understanding of a situation, but God sees it in a different way.

II.

That was the situation on that Galilean hillside 2,000 years ago. The disciples saw things one way; Jesus saw them in another way. The disciples drew one conclusion. Jesus' reality was entirely different.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus had been teaching to the crowd for a long time that day, and it was getting late. However, there were no concession stands like we have today to keep the crowds happy, and the disciples were getting worried. They knew that a large crowd could become restless, and so they basically told Jesus to wrap it up so people could leave and get something to eat

But Jesus didn't see a restless crowd. The reading tells us he saw sheep with no shepherd. So, what did he do? He said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat."

Whoa! What must the disciples thought about that? Did they wonder if they heard Jesus correctly? Maybe they thought "Jesus, what are you talking about, we're in the religion business; not the catering business. How can the twelve of us feed all these people?"

Their actual response was more subdued, but no less skeptical. They somewhat cynically asked a rhetorical question, "are we to go out and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and feed them?" Like the salesman who was obsessed about the number five and misunderstood, the disciples also were focused on numbers and did not understand what Jesus was doing.

But Jesus told them to go out and collect whatever was available. The disciples obeyed. By this time they were starting to get the idea that Jesus just might know what he was doing. They did what Jesus told them and, as we say, the rest is history. We know what happened. They even had food left over.

III.

So, how do we understand this story as it speaks to us today? First, we have to resist the temptation to just assume that God will simply meet all our needs. God does not always say "I'll do it." Sometimes he tells us, like he told the disciples, "you do it." And if we trust in God and count on him, then we see, like the disciples saw, that the things we have will go further than we think.

We live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. There seems to be a distribution problem. And we live in a world full of God, and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there is a distribution problem.

And there is a relationship between those two realities. There is poverty and injustice in the world today, and in our country and community today, not because God has not done his part, but because many people are not doing theirs.

This story of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that is reported in all four Gospels. It is in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You hear it every year because it is an important story with an important theological truth.

That truth is that God is not just going to wave his hand and solve the world's problems on his own. That won't happen until God's kingdom is fully here, and we know that hasn't happened yet. All we have to do is watch the evening news to know that we still live in a fallen world where evil and injustice thrive, where poverty and hunger persist, and where many good people suffer while the wicked prosper.

Note that in today's reading, Jesus did not feed the people directly. He did it through the disciples. God's power clearly was present, but that power was working through the disciples. They were the ones actually providing the food to the people.

That still is true today. It is up to us, as the church, to do our part in the community. Just as Jesus told the disciples, "you do it," he also tells us the same, even though at times we think we don't have the resources or abilities necessary for the task.

However, if we place ourselves at God's disposal so that he can use us today, just as Jesus used the disciples two thousand years ago, then miracles can happen.

IV.

This can be a challenge for us, and for the Church. How many times has the Church in this country said “we’re in the religion business, not the catering business?” How easy has it been for churches to respond as the disciples responded—by not providing because they didn’t think they had enough?

Did they, in effect, say we only have five loaves and two fish, and therefore this problem is more than we can handle, or did they bring it to Jesus in faith?

The world is faced with poverty and injustice on the outside, and disbelief and faithlessness on the inside. There is physical hunger in the third world, and we cannot deny that there is spiritual hunger in our own.

And the Church can sometimes get in the way. I have seen priests who care only about their rituals and their rites, and seem unaware that homeless people are struggling to survive only two blocks from the church. At the other end of the spectrum, I have seen priests who only seem to care about social activism, and it the only time they really enjoy wearing their collar is on the picket line

V.

The solution would seem to be obvious, wouldn’t it? Just find a balance between the two extremes. All we have to do is bring ourselves to God, do the best we can, and trust in him to do the rest.

Well, that is very true. Today’s gospel tells us that when we share what we have there will be enough for all. It tells us that Jesus asks more of us than we think we have to give, but if we do give what we have, then we find that Jesus has a way of making it be enough.

And that’s an easy thing to say when we are giving advice to others. It’s easy for a preacher to say it from the pulpit when he’s talking to somebody else. But the real problem comes when we have to do it in our own lives.

Let’s face it. When we are planning for ourselves, we don’t want to go beyond what we know we can handle. That’s true whether it’s about a possible job change, or when we are working on a strategic plan for a parish, or when we are faced with a decision about whether or not we can make a tithe to the church this year, or when we must decide whether we can further commit ourselves to another lay ministry, or some other worthwhile cause.

But looking at our own resources and abilities is not what God calls us to do—and here is the key point. God does not call us to do only those things that we know we can do on our own. No, God calls us to do things that would not be possible without God’s help.

That really is our choice. We can limit ourselves to things that we can handle, like the disciples in today’s gospel wanted to do, or else we step out in faith and do more, which is what Jesus wanted them to do. There really is no middle ground about that.

The disciples on that hillside told Jesus “we have a problem.” Jesus said, “you solve it, and I will be there to help you.”

If we, in our work to advance God’s kingdom, limit our visions, and our ministries, and our work in the church to only those things that we are sure we can do ourselves, then they probably don’t reflect much of a vision or ministry. But if we reach out beyond ourselves, as Jesus told the disciples to do, and if we commit ourselves to something that is only possible with God’s help, then we will see that God’s abundance is more than sufficient.

VI.

Today's gospel has two fundamental messages for our lives and the future of our Church. There is a specific message that feeding the hungry today is the continuation of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. But there also is a larger message that applies directly to the Church. It is that the mission of the disciples is the mission of the church. Just as they obeyed and let Jesus power work through them as a group to feed the crowd, so also we are called to let Jesus work through us as a community to build up people around us.

If we bring to God all our strengths and weaknesses, our skills and shortcomings, our faith and our doubts, our successes and our fear of failure, he will make us adequate to the task.

He will take our paltry little loaves and fishes and turn them into a feast. He will equip us for ministry and mission, and he will enable us to do what is needed with what we have. *Amen.*