

More Than We Think

Mark 6:35-44

July 26, 2009

I.

Today our Old Testament reading was about the well-known story of David and Bathsheba. You might recall the classic 1951 movie of the same name starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward.

And this might be the first Sunday in the history of the Episcopal Church that the biblical account of this rather large blemish on David's record has been used as a reading for churches throughout the country. We have had a new lectionary since 2007, and it offers a broader range of Old Testament stories.

But I'm not going to preach on this today, principally because it is part one of a two-part narrative of David, Bathsheba, and the consequences of their sin. Part two comes next week, and I plan to talk about the entire story then.

Instead, today I would like to go into another famous biblical story, the feeding of the five thousand described in today's Gospel. It's the only miracle of Jesus reported in all four Gospels, and has been given much attention by theologians and scholars. This, of course, means there are differing interpretations of its meaning.

Some say that it calls us to provide for the physical needs of others. They point out that we live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. And they correctly say there is something wrong with that picture. There is a distribution problem.

Others say that today's reading addresses spiritual needs rather than physical needs. They point out that we live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there seems to be a distribution problem.

And still others say it's a message to the church to take whatever resources it has and minister to the crowds, both spiritually and physically. It's a call for the church to understand that its work is not limited by budgets and strategic plans, but extends beyond itself with a mission that God will bless and sustain.

All these interpretations are correct. The common thread running through them is that God wants us to do his work in faith, even if the outcomes are unclear. He wants us to trust in faith that he will enable us to be the church that Jesus left behind. And he wants that church to be more than an organization that thinks only about budgets, agendas, committees, and worldly things.

And sometimes the church, like the disciples in today's reading, does not attend to the mission we are called to carry out. Sometimes we don't always remember that we are a church as well as a business. We can limit our perspectives, but God wants to broaden them.

II.

Stories can be useful to illustrate a point. I'm reminded of a preacher who gave a demonstration to emphasize his sermon. As he began he placed four earthworms in four separate jars. The first went into a jar of alcohol. The second was placed in a container of cigarette smoke. He put the third worm in a jar of chocolate syrup, and the fourth went into a jar of good clean soil.

At the end of the sermon, the preacher opened the jars and found that the worm in alcohol was dead, the worm in cigarette smoke was dead, the worm in chocolate syrup was dead, and the worm in good clean soil was alive.

So he asked the congregation, "What can we learn from this demonstration? Little Victoria, sitting in the back, quickly raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

The moral of this story is that sometimes we, like little Victoria, can draw the wrong conclusion by not looking more deeply into the circumstances at hand.

And that was what happened on that Galilean hillside. The disciples saw things one way but Jesus saw them another way. The disciples drew one conclusion, but Jesus' reality was very different.

III.

The Gospel tells us Jesus had been teaching the crowd for a long time, and it was getting late. But there were no concession stands, and there were no youth groups to make pancakes or spaghetti. The disciples were 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. Instead he saw people in need. 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 hear Jesus correctly? "You give them something to eat." Maybe they thought, "Jesus, what are you talking about, we're in the religion business; not the catering business. This is not in our job description."

If that's what they thought, Mark wisely omitted it. But they rather cynically did ask how they could afford to go buy bread to feed all the people. They were focused on numbers rather than what Jesus was trying to accomplish.

But Jesus told them to collect what they had, which was five loaves and two fish, and the disciples obeyed. They did what Jesus said, and the rest is history. We know what happened. Everyone was fed and there was food left over.

IV.

So, how does this story speak to us today? Part of the answer is that 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 then we can see, like the disciples saw, that the things we have can go further than we think.

This can be a challenge for us and the church. Anyone who ever has been a member of a Vestry knows how concerns of the moment can overshadow the larger purposes the church is called to serve. That's why Vestry meetings at St. Thomas are more than just business meetings. We also begin and end in prayer, and we come in here and celebrate the Eucharist as part of the agenda.

And when we pray before the meetings we ask God to teach us first to seek his honor and glory. We ask him to help us remember that his power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. And we ask that he grant us knowledge of his will and the courage to pursue it.

That's one of the points of today's Gospel. It tells us that God is not concerned about whether we think we have enough to do his work. He doesn't want us to say, "Lord, we only have five loaves and two fish." He wants us to think beyond our own worldly anxieties and trust in him.

This means God does not want us to limit our vision to what we think is possible just in our own abilities. If we do that we probably would not have much of a vision, and would prevent God's grace from working in our lives. We would be like any other secular organization. But God wants us, in our own lives and as the church, to be ready to do what is not possible without God's help. Then, his grace can become evident.

And that applies not only to how we handle our own affairs, but also to how we work in the community. I said earlier that the world is full of food and full of God, yet millions live in poverty and faithlessness. And at times the church does not put its best foot forward. I'm sad to say that I have seen priests who cared only about their rituals and rites and stained glass windows, and seemed unaware that homeless people were struggling to survive only blocks away.

Today's Gospel calls us to seek God inside the church and to take God outside the church into the world. It 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 Jesus has a way of making it be enough.

And that's easy to say when we are giving advice to others. It's easy to say when we are talking to somebody else. But it might be more difficult when we try to do it ourselves.

Let's face it. When planning for ourselves, we don't want to go beyond what we know we can handle. That's true when considering a possible job change, or when making a decision about whether we can tithe to the church this year, or when trying to decide other important questions.

But looking only at our own resources and abilities is not always what God calls us to do. We can limit ourselves to things we can handle, like the disciples in today's Gospel wanted to do, or we can step out in faith and do more, which is what Jesus wanted them to do.

The heart of today's reading is that disciples on that hillside told Jesus "We have a problem." Jesus said, "You solve it, and I will be there to help you." The disciples had focused on what was material and forgot what was spiritual. Jesus, however, never made that separation.

And we, like the disciples, are called to do more than we think we can do. If we do that, if we reach beyond ourselves, we can see that God's abundance can be more than sufficient.

One of my favorite Old Testament teachings is Proverbs 3:5. It says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." When we do that, we can be blessed and know God's grace.

V.

So, today's gospel has a powerful messages for our lives and the future of our church. It is that the mission of the disciples on that hillside also is our mission today. Just as they obeyed and let Jesus' power work through them as a group to minister to the crowd, so also we are called to let Jesus work through us to strengthen ourselves and those around us.

If we bring to God 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 can 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.*