

## ***Making The Impossible Possible***

Mark 6:35-44

July 29, 2012

### **I.**

I would like to begin today with a story about a preacher who gave a demonstration as part of his sermon. He started by putting 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.

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

### **II.**

Today's Gospel about feeding the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus reported in all four Gospels. It's an important part of the story of Jesus' ministry, and has been given much attention by scholars and theologians. As a result, there are several interpretations of its meaning.

Some say that it calls us to provide for the physical needs of others. Others say that the reading speaks to spiritual needs rather than physical needs. And still others say it's a message to the church to take whatever resources it has, and minister to the crowds spiritually and physically.

All of these interpretations are valid. The common thread running through them is that God wants us to step out and serve his purposes in faith, even if the outcomes are unclear to us, and if we do he will be with us.

And this is contrary to our instincts, isn't it? We have a natural tendency to allow worldly realities to creep into our spiritual lives. This can lead to limiting ourselves to doing only those things for God and the church that we, in our own minds, think actually are possible.

### **III.**

Jesus' miraculous transformation of loaves and fishes makes that point. Jesus had been teaching a large crowd that had gathered in a deserted place, and it was getting late. He had been speaking for a long time.

But there were no concession stands, no free hot dogs, and no youth groups to make spaghetti brunches like we will have today. The disciples were worried. They knew that a large crowd could become restless, and thought it all had gone on long enough. So they suggested that Jesus wrap it up so people could leave and get something to eat.

But Jesus didn't see a restless crowd. And I doubt if he thought the people were getting bored. I might worry about such things when I preach, and I give thanks that no one has ever told me to wrap it up so they could get something to eat.

But Jesus instead saw hungry people. He had been feeding them spiritually with his teaching, but he also recognized their physical hunger. So, what did he do? He said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat."

Whoa! What must the disciples have 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 the disciples thought, Mark wisely omitted it from his Gospel. 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. They missed the point.

A few minutes ago I told of the preacher with the four jars of worms and how his experiment led to the wrong conclusion. I can reinforce that with another example. A preacher at a downtown church liked to walk in the park during his lunch hour. One day he saw a man who appeared to be homeless sitting on a park bench. He stopped, gave him \$20, and whispered, "Never despair."

The next day the preacher again was walking in the park, and the same man found him and gave him \$80 back. The preacher was perplexed, and the other fellow said, "Father you were right! Never Despair won the third race and paid 4 to 1."

The point again is that sometimes things are not what they seem to be. And that was true for the disciples in today's reading. They were certain they had a hungry crowd on their hands with no food anywhere.

But Jesus told them to collect what food 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 were even twelve baskets of food left over.

And I should say that, contrary to speculation by some, this story is not about people sharing food they brought with them. The reading clearly says otherwise; they had no food. That idea also would eliminate the miracle of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes. And if people had brought food, many already would have begun eating during the long day as they listened.

#### **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 things we have can go further than we think.

This can be a challenge for us and the church. Anyone who ever has served on 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 begin and end in prayer. 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. And when the meeting is adjourned and we come in here and celebrate the Eucharist.

That leads to one of the points of today's Gospel. 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 it probably would not be much of a vision. God might not even show up for that. We would be much like any other secular organization. But God calls us, in our own lives and as the church, to be ready to do what is not possible without God's help.

And that's easy to say when we are giving advice to others, isn't it? We can have a lot of wisdom in those circumstances. But it's a little more difficult when we apply it to ourselves.

When planning for ourselves, we usually 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 many important questions.

But today's reading tells us otherwise. The disciples on that hillside told Jesus "We have a problem." Jesus said, "You solve it, and I will be there to help you."

And he will do the same for us when we do his work. If the Holy Spirit goes before us we cannot fail. When 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." As 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 Jesus gave 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 the Lord 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, he will honor and bless our church, and he will enable us to find the ways to do what is needed with what we have. *Amen.*