

Treasure Island: The Treasure of One Another

Mark 6:30-44

August 6, 2006

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 is one of my favorite biblical stories. Perhaps it is a fond reminder of my own visit to the Sea of Galilee, which was the most beautiful part of my tour of the Holy Land. We visited the Church of the Beatitudes. There are mosaics of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes which date to the fourth and fifth centuries. Our group shared in Holy Communion on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, remembering the multitude who gathered to be fed in Word and bread by the One who is the Bread of Life.

I appreciate the spirit of community Jesus fosters in this story. I imagine the large crowd gathered around Jesus, eagerly listening to his every word, so hungry for his spiritual nourishment that they fail to recognize their physical hunger. It is the disciples who first tire of their growling stomachs. They've been there all day and sunset is coming on. As some of us get irritable when it's been too long since eating, I can hear the disciples complaining to Jesus, "They've been listening to you all day. Don't you think it's about time for a break? Send them off to buy themselves something to eat."

But Jesus doesn't let the disciples off so easily. He puts the responsibility for satisfying the crowd's needs upon the disciples. Now they really complain. "It would take eight months of a good salary to buy even one breadstick per person. We don't have that kind of money, Jesus. Remember, you just sent us on a mission telling us not to take any bread, bag, or money. How do you expect us to find enough food for all these people?"

Undaunted, Jesus says, "Go see how many loaves you can find." Mark doesn't tell us their source, but the disciples return with five loaves of bread and two fish. Perhaps they pool what they have in their own pockets. Maybe they go out into the crowd to see if others had thought to bring a picnic lunch. Jesus works with what he has been given. He asks the disciples to break the crowd up into smaller groups. Fifty to one hundred people is still a fairly large group, but small enough that they could gather around in a set of circles facing one another and learning one another's names. A sense of community builds in a smaller setting.

The intimacy of these small groups may be a key to the unfolding miracle. The Greek word used here for "sit in groups" is *sumposia*, from which we get the word symposium. In Greek it means a party, a festival of

life, happiness, of good things to eat and drink. Jesus breaks the crowd into little parties for joy, conversation, laughter, and shalom.

As people develop relationships with one another, they learn of other needs and share of their resources. Jesus' act of sharing the five loaves and two fish becomes a model for their own sharing. Having spent the day in the presence of this man of God, they emulate his actions and share generously of the meager resources they have. Many have indeed brought a small loaf as a snack for the day's journey. They offer their gifts and, in pooling their resources, there is enough for all and even leftovers for others.

In the growth of relationships and the act of sharing, the people embody the generosity of God of which Jesus may have been teaching. They learn of their need for one another and the gift that we can be to one another. In the community created by Christ, we discover the spiritual sustenance, the human intimacy, and the mutual sharing that make for healthy human living. Following the teachings of Jesus, we find a contagious generosity that overflows in abundance, eager to be shared. We find that we need one another, that we can't go it alone. When we share our gifts, God multiplies them to meet the needs of all.

In recent weeks, I read three articles with references to the study out of Duke University called, "Social Isolation in America." In a face to face study of 1,467 American adults, one-fourth report that they have nobody to talk to about "important matters." Another quarter reports that they are just one person away from nobody. This study is a replica of one done 20 years ago. In only two decades, from 1985 to 2004, the number of people who have no one to talk to has doubled. The number of confidants of the average American has gone down from three to two. We have lost relationships with neighbors and friends who provide help, support, advice, and connections to the wider world. We are feeling more and more isolated. Our emotional needs for companionship and community are not being fulfilled.

This sense of isolation was prominent in Hurricane Katrina. Lynn Smith-Lovin, a co-author of the study, suggests that "The people we saw sitting on roofs after Katrina hit were probably people without close ties to someone with a car to get them out." Bob Howard, spokesman for the American Red Cross' Hurricane Relief Project confirms that, "People who had friends and family were probably the most likely to evacuate."¹

We need the treasure of one another for the emotional and spiritual support community provides for our total well-being. We can't go it alone. Jesus knew this and that may be why he has the crowd break up into smaller groups where they can get to know one another. And in the building of relationships, there comes the act of sharing. It arises spontaneously and

naturally among those whom we know and love. When I was a child, my mom would often send me next door to the neighbor's home to borrow an egg or a cup of sugar. In these days I'm more likely to make a quick trip to the store to get the needed item than to bother the neighbor I don't know very well. In our sense of isolation we don't offer or receive the gifts of generosity that are so much a part of the Christian life – and necessary to human life.

I like to think that Jesus' gesture of sharing the five loaves and two fish found by his grumpy disciples provided a model of generosity for others to naturally follow. We each have something to contribute to the common good. We have a need to give, most of us more than we have the need to receive. To be satisfied, as was the crowd that day, we need to exchange the gifts of life with one another.

A wonderful Jewish legend is told in a children's book called, *In God's Hands*.² Jacob was a rich man, busily thinking about how he could make more money. When he came to the synagogue, he fell asleep when the rabbi started to speak. When the service was over, Jacob would wake up and walk back home. David was a poor man with a large family to feed. He was the caretaker of the synagogue.

One day Jacob woke up for a moment during the reading of the Torah. He was awake long enough to hear one verse from the Book of Leviticus: "You shall bake twelve loaves of bread, and set them before Me in two rows, six in each row." That was all he heard, for he yawned and fell back to sleep. When the service was over, Jacob, believing that it was God who had spoken to him, went home and baked twelve loaves of bread. He carried the 12 loaves to the synagogue. He opened the doors to the Holy Ark where the Torah was kept and carefully set the 12 loaves inside it in two neat rows, just as God had told him. Then he went home.

After Jacob left, David, the poor man, came into the synagogue to clean. He stopped in front of the Holy Ark and prayed. "O God, my family is out of food. I am afraid that if You do not help us soon, we shall starve." Then he opened the doors of the ark and there were 12 loaves of bread. "O God, I didn't know you worked like that! Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers the prayers of those who call upon You in need." David joyfully gathered the 12 loaves into a sack and ran home to show his wife and children the bread from heaven.

After David left, Jacob returned to the empty synagogue to see if God really ate the bread. He slowly approached the ark and opened the doors. The bread was gone! "Oh, God," he whispered, "You really ate the bread! It's a miracle. I thought you were only kidding. Please forgive me: I

wasn't sure it was really You, so I scrimped on the eggs. Next week I'll bring 12 new loaves and spare no expense." He ran home to tell his family that God had accepted their gift.

The second week Jacob brought 12 loaves of bread with raisins. He prayerfully offered his gift to God, placing the bread in the ark. After he left, the poor man came and prayed for food to feed his family. He opened the ark to find another tiny miracle – 12 loaves of bread. He praised God and ran home to share God's gift with his family.

This continued week after week, Jacob, the rich man, bringing 12 loaves of bread to the ark as a gift for God. And David the poor man, bringing home 12 loaves of bread from the ark as a gift from God. The weeks grew into months and years and the giving and receiving became a routine thing for both. Jacob threw the loaves into the ark and David came expecting to find them and shouting, "Thanks, God."

One day the rabbi happened to watch the exchange in the synagogue. Astonished he called Jacob and David together and told them what he had witnessed. The rabbi said, "The holy ark is not some kind of heavenly bakery!" The two men were disappointed. There wasn't any miracle after all. God doesn't eat bread. God doesn't bake bread.

The rabbi said, "Jacob, you will have to continue baking the bread anyway. David, you will have to eat the bread. Now you understand that your hands are God's hands." Jacob and David looked at their hands and then they looked into each other's faced. They understood: their hands are the hands of God.

That, my friends, is the meaning of Holy Communion: the hands of God reaching out to us in love and generosity, feeding us that we might be the hands of God, embracing one another in community. We come to the table this day, to bless the bread brought as gifts for God, to break the bread remembering the life of Christ, to eat the bread renewing our spirits, and to share the bread with one another. May we treasure the gift of one another, for we are the hands of God by which all are fed. Amen.

¹ Ely Portillo, “More Americans feel isolated, study shows,” *Contra Costa Times*, June 25, 2006.

² The following retelling is adapted from Lawrence Kushner and Gary Schmidt, *In God's Hands*, (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005).

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