

This week our gospel takes us to the feeding of the 5,000. This is the only miracle that is common to all four gospels, meaning Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; all felt this was a significant moment in Jesus' ministry revealing his true identity as the Son of God. It's easy to see why it would have had such an impact. Jesus had attracted thousands of people who wanted to see him, to hear him talk, to experience his relationship with the Father. Like most crowds, sheep if you remember our gospel from last week, they don't have much sense and need a leader. They have followed him, and now they are hungry, they are dependent on him and he is responsible for them.

Jesus has led them to a place where there is "a great deal of grass" – here we go with the sheep again, he has them sit down, he takes the loaves and fish, giving thanks in a traditional Jewish blessing, and distributes the bread and fish to those who were seated. This is the classic story about God's abundance when what seems to be a very little becomes enough and more than enough to feed those who were in need. We see one of its predecessors is in our reading from 2nd Kings in which Elisha is offered food for himself and instead offers it to the hundred people who were gathered and what was not enough is transformed food for a hundred people with some left over.

God's abundance is like that as we see every week in our Food Pantry. Some of you remember the days when the Food Pantry was a quiet affair, dependent on only the donations of our parishioners, there wasn't much to give away and there weren't many customers. Eventually, thanks to Diane Butler we got connected to Long Island Cares and Long Island Harvest and even the Community Garden. Judy Celauro, Diane, and Janice and Rob McEvoy have been amazing about picking up supplies from these organizations and our customer base has grown exponentially and we now serve several hundred people a month. There is also a Ceramic Studio and a Bakery that make contributions every week and still other organizations make financial contributions so that Judy and others are able to make purchases for items that are not available or as plentiful from Long Island Cares or Long Island Harvest. Just as extraordinary are the Food Pantry Volunteers, there are almost as many volunteers who are not members of the parish as are members of the parish. The work is good and the ministry is good, it is part of how we live out our stewardship theme

Coming together in faithful community to serve God in the world.

Furthermore, some of our regular and very local customers, as in across the street and around the corner, actually help to unload deliveries so they also have a role in helping those around them. Finally, the work that is done is done with grace and generosity. On Thursday there was a woman from one of the agencies with who we are involved who came to inspect the storage areas and the food handling process. She was so pleased with everything she saw that she mentioned to Ronny in the office that this was a model for other food pantries.

Now unlike Jesus distributing bread that was multiplied miraculously, the miracle of the Food Pantry requires more than a little sweat equity, muscle, planning, flexibility, and some good human relation skills. Nevertheless God's abundance is there for us to see and to access if we are willing to do so and there are examples everywhere – which you will find if you pause to reflect. But the Feeding of the 5,000 is about far more than God's abundance.

First let's go back to the gospel lesson that we read this morning. How many of you noticed that it was from the gospel of John and not Mark? We have been reading from the gospel of Mark pretty consistently since Pentecost because that is what is prescribed by our lectionary for Year B. But this week and for the next four weeks we will be reading from the gospel of John. We do this because Mark is the shortest of the gospels and if we didn't pause for a mid-season shift we would run out of Mark before the end of the year. The Feeding of the 5,000 provides a natural break because John's gospel offers a series of discourses on Jesus saying "I am the bread of life" which enables us to do a deeper dive into what Jesus means and about the nature of Holy Communion itself.

Those of you who have attended a Maundy Thursday Service, that service in Holy Week before Good Friday, may remember that the gospel is always from John and it is not about the institution of the Last Supper, those passages in the synoptic gospels that have Jesus saying "do this in remembrance of me" because there is no such passage in the gospel of John. No, John's focus is on footwashing, that scene where at the "last supper" Jesus takes off his outer robe and washes his disciples' feet thereby scandalizing the disciples and giving them the new commandment "to love one another as I have loved you." Clearly foot washing never became a sacrament and it leaves us wondering where John stood on the institution of the Eucharist for his disciples.

Most scholars agree that John's theology of the Eucharist is best expressed in the feeding of the 5,000 and expanded in the subsequent readings from chapter 6 about the "Bread of Life".

We experience God's abundance, Jesus' gift of his body and blood each week as priests the world over take ordinary bread and wine, the offerings of our life and labors and turn it into gifts that make us a part of God and each other. In this food and drink we receive forgiveness of our sins, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and nourishment for our work in the world. That my friends is true abundance but we have the benefit of 2,000 years of teaching about the significance of that moment and those crowds who followed Jesus, well they were hungry and they saw in him a meal ticket, a prophet who would restore the nation of Israel.

You notice that when they come to make him king – he withdraws to the mountain by himself. Jesus did not come to feed those all those who were hungry that day and every day for the rest of their lives. Jesus did not come to heal everyone who was sick and prevent illness from ever happening again; Jesus did not come to root out every demon who had taken up residence in a human being, Jesus did not come to permanently quell the forces of chaos so that there would never be another storm at sea. As Jesus will say to Pilate during his trial, "My kingdom is not from this world." Jesus came so that we might have a relationship with him and through him with the Father, a relationship that would support us and sustain us regardless of the accidents and circumstances of life.

Jesus performed these miracles to demonstrate the power he had from God because of his relationship with God. But neither the crowd nor his disciples understand Jesus and what he was offering or the transformation that happens in our own lives when we accept him as Lord and Savior.

Next week we will hear how the crowd will follow him and demand another sign of his power. Like children watching a magician the crowd will shout “Do it again, do it again” and Jesus will respond by saying: “I am the bread of life.” By the week after next the noise of his following will have attracted negative attention from the authorities and Jesus will add fuel to the fire by claiming that those who eat this bread will live forever and that the bread is his flesh. The week after that we will hear Jesus raise the ante and say that he will raise up those who eat his flesh and drink his blood. By the time we hear the last of the “I am the Bread of Life” sayings the disciples will revolt and tell Jesus that his teaching is more than a bit difficult.

You think?

Amen.