

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**July 25, 2021**  
**17th Sunday of Year B    John 6:1-15**

Today we have the story of Jesus feeding the multitude. It is mentioned no less than five times in the Gospel--the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. Archaeologists often find this scene depicted in a prominent space in the places where the first Christians would gather for worship. Obviously this story played a very important role in defining Jesus' mission and message. Jesus is trying to bring about a change of consciousness among His disciples, a change in the very way that they looked at life itself.

Now let's look at what is going on in the passage. Jesus asks Philip, one of the apostles, how are they going to feed such a large crowd. But, as the evangelist tells the story, this is a set-up. Jesus knows already what he is going to do. Philip, in his response, "We couldn't possibly get enough to feed them all," represents a point of view that seems to be very hard-nosed, very realistic. Then a boy appears and offers what little he has, just five barley loaves and two fish, as a solution to the problem. Of course, his offer is dismissed by the other disciples. They are good with numbers; they can do the math. There's no way this meager amount can feed such a large crowd.

Remember Jesus once said, "Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the Reign of God." The little boy here represents what it means to live within the Reign of God, to live with the God-consciousness that Jesus uniquely possessed and that He was always trying to communicate to those who would listen. The boy offers what little he has, and this becomes the catalyst for all that will unfold. Here is a child who has not yet become conditioned by our more adult approach to life, our fear-based, acquisitive, hoarding, self-centered mentality. The little boy is motivated by generosity because he is still connected with God, the One who is the overflowing Source of graciousness, of blessing. The story is the unfolding of two rival perspectives to the challenges of life--the one represented by the disciples that is a perspective based on scarcity, that there is never enough to go around. The other, represented by the little boy, is the perspective of abundance. The passage concludes, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted. So they collected them and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments." In the Reign of God, with those who possess this God-consciousness, there is always more than enough to go around. It all depends on what you do with what you have.

Let me give an example. Today's gospel story is about feeding people. During a

time of famine, the question is how are so many people going to be fed, when it appears—it appears---there is not enough to go around. Some of you may be familiar with the Great Hunger, the famine that befell Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century. Maybe that was the time when, for some of you, your ancestors were forced to leave their native land and immigrate to these shores. After the potato crop failed, people were dying by the hundreds of thousands. Yet, at the very same time that the Irish peasants were starving to death, the wealthy landowners were exporting their harvests to England where they would get a good price for their produce. One didn't have to look very hard to see that there was in fact "more than enough to go around," i.e., if those who had the means to alleviate the desperate situation were possessed more by compassion than by self-interest.

Now let's get a bit closer to home and reflect on the loss of life because of the pandemic we are still living through. Some have described it as "apocalyptic," not because it is characterized by the "end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it," with zombies running through the streets, with fires and floods, but it is "apocalyptic" in the original, Biblical sense of the word. "Apocalypse" means a revealing, an unveiling, a disclosure of what was there all the time, but which we didn't see, or more likely, we didn't want to see. In the current pandemic more people have died than had to die Why? Because of long-time inadequate health care, having to live in food-deserts, deprived of access to proper nutrition, and deprived of a decent education that would teach how to live a healthful life-style. There are other factors as well. The point is that there has always been "more than enough to go around" to solve these problems and allow more people to live healthy, productive lives, except for the fact of the inequitable distribution of wealth in our nation. Because of the hoarding of resources by those who have, many of those who have not, have died.

Another example is the failure to ramp up resources to manufacture vaccines for people living in the developing world will mean many more there will die who don't have to. That failure may even result in an even more deadly variant developing in God-knows-where that will return to wreak havoc among us. If you saw the opening ceremony of the Olympics, you no doubt will remember that beautiful combination of technology and art with the thousands of drones forming the gleaming globe floating above the stadium. It was a reminder that on this little blue planet, we are all in this together. Today's Gospel challenges us to remember precisely that--to be like the little boy in today's story, to live within the Reign of God, to live with the God-consciousness that Jesus offers to us, and to offer what we have, to do what we can, to alleviate the suffering of those around us.

Let me conclude with a story know as "The Parable of the Long Spoons." A man

asked a rabbi, "I'd like to know what Heaven and Hell are like." The rabbi told the man to imagine a room wherein there's a table set with all sorts of wonderful foods, but there is one requirement—the people must eat the food with spoons that are five feet long. Behind the door is the sound of the spoons banging on the table and all sorts of scream and curses; the people around the table are fighting with each other. This is Hell. Imagine another room with a table set with the same wonderful foods and with the same requirement, that people must use the long spoons to eat the food. But behind this door there is singing and laughter. Open the door and see the people in that room are using the spoons to feed each other. This is Heaven.

In the "good news" announced by Jesus, Heaven is not seen simply where we hope to go when we die. Heaven is always coming to us, if we recognize it. Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God is at hand, is among you. St. Catherine of Siena put it another way when she said, "All the way to Heaven is Heaven." When we live our lives grounded in a spirit of generosity and trust, with an attitude of abundance rather than scarcity, we are already half-way there.

I said a few minutes ago that this theme of Jesus feeding the multitude was frequently depicted on the walls of the places where the first Christians worshipped. That is because they saw a connection between what they were doing when they worshipped and what Jesus did on the mountainside. In the Gospel story we read that "Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them among those reclining." On the night before Jesus died we read that "He took the bread, blessed it and gave it to His disciples saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body that will be given up for you.'" It is the very same gesture. It tells us that the risen Jesus Who was there on the mountainside is still present among us. As we welcome His presence into our lives in our reception of the Eucharist, Jesus empowers us to live with His awareness, His consciousness---to live with generosity, with trust, in the expectation of abundance.