

sermon-7/26/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Hunger”
John 6:1-21

Before we even begin to talk about our text for today, a word or two about miracles is in order. I am indebted to Douglas John Hall, a well respected biblical scholar, for what follows. In his commentary on this passage he says what I imagine is in at least some of your minds.

He says miracles today, unlike in biblical times, are not very persuasive when it comes to convincing others about Jesus’ power and authority. For those of us with a modern scientific worldview, miracle stories can even “repel belief,” or at least “reinforce doubt.” He puts it this way. “When the miraculous is identified too exclusively with those literally incredible things, the wonder of divine grace that permeates the whole of life is deprived of a witness.” When we confine miracles, in other words, to only those incredible events like walking on water, or feeding a multitude with very little food, and say those events must be taken literally, or not at all, we miss so much.

But, he also has a warning for those of us with skeptical minds. “The habit of ‘explaining everything,’ surely one of the more dangerous as well as pretentious adventures of the modern spirit, ends-and has ended!-in a culture that has all but lost the capacity to wonder.” Hall is affirming the world, and God’s presence in the world, are bigger than our sophisticated, scientific minds can explain or comprehend. We don’t know everything.

Hall is presenting us with a very fine line to walk. Don’t be too naïve or literal in reading the miracle stories. At the same time, don’t be so presumptuous to think that our minds can comprehend everything leaving no room for mystery or wonder. To take it too literally is to make it irrelevant for our time. To dismiss it entirely as being naively unscientific drains this text of its mystery. If we don’t walk that line those of us who are hungry for spiritual nurture, hungry for the bread of life, may miss being fed by this passage.

Let’s jump in. The feeding of the five thousand was obviously a very important story for the early church. It is the only miracle story that is recounted in all four gospels. And, in three of the gospels, it is followed immediately with the story of Jesus walking on the sea. Apparently the gospel writers want us to wrestle with the meaning of those stories as they play off one another. What do these stories have to say about hunger and fear?

To be a spiritual person we will need to come to terms with our hungers. Obviously I am not just talking about our physical hunger. Certainly not having enough food was an issue for many poor people in Jesus’ day. It continues to be an issue today. Life, however, is about more than the physical.

Our Old Testament lesson is a great example of someone who did not come to terms with his hunger. David was the king of Israel. All was going well. He was fabulously wealthy according to the standards of that day. He certainly did not lack for food. But it was not enough. He sees something he wants and he can’t control his hunger for more. It leads him to do despicable things. Ultimately he ends up being destroyed by his hungers.

One of the issues surrounding our hungers is the difference between scarcity versus abundance thinking. To see life as not offering us enough is to live with scarcity thinking. Commentators tell us this leads to anxiety and competition. We are afraid there is only a limited amount of things we want like food, toys, sex, or even love.

Abundance thinking leads to generosity and hope. There will be enough to go around. I will get what I need to live a meaningful life. I don't need to fight to get my fair share. My abundance does not have to mean someone else's scarcity.

The disciples in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 are totally into scarcity thinking. They saw the need and concluded it was impossible to meet that need. How can we feed all these people? We can't afford it. We only have so much. It can't be done.

In Jesus' presence, however, abundance reigns. They bring him what they think is a pitiful amount of food. It is significant the bread they present is made from barley. Scholars tell us that was the bread of the poor. Jesus gives thanks, and the food of the poor, no matter how meager, is enough.

Note, the story does not say he turned this humble food into a rich feast. This was a simple meal, but it fed everyone. Simple was enough. The obvious question this raises for us in our day is: Are we satisfied with our needs being met in simple ways? Do we feel deprived if we can't have the latest technological toy, if we can't go on expensive vacations, if those closest to us don't meet all our expectations?

People have responded to our current economic downturn in many different ways. Some have been caught in scarcity thinking. They have let the downturn control their outlook on life. Others have found some of the simple pleasures they had taken for granted, or ignored, to be really satisfying and all they finally need to have a very rich life.

This in no way makes light of some of the hardships many in our culture have suffered because of the recession. People have lost jobs and homes. It would be cruel indeed to accuse them of scarcity thinking if those tough realities led them to want more.

Certainly Jesus did not make light of the real hunger of the poor who crowded around him. When Jesus met their physical need for food, we are reminded when Jesus reigns, all will be fed. When we act as if Jesus reigns, we will work for an end to poverty and physical hardship wherever we see it.

At the same time, we need to come to terms with our many hungers and our tendency to see life as never fully meeting our needs. It is interesting that John makes a point to say after all had eaten they were able to gather twelve basketfuls of leftovers. It is no coincidence that twelve is the number of his inner circle of disciples. These were the guys that thought there would not be enough. All were fed, and each of them had a basketful to boot! So much for scarcity thinking.

This story is followed by the disciples, without Jesus, getting into a boat and crossing the sea. They ended up in a storm, in the dark, getting nowhere. That pretty much describes the early church, and maybe many of us. They were living in a very tumultuous time, in

the boat called the church, and it felt like they were on their own. Jesus was absent. It was a dark time indeed.

Most of us have had times like that when life throws us a curve, when we seem to be drowning in one storm or another and we can't sense God's presence no matter how hard we try. Our prayers stick in our throats. It feels impossible.

John says Jesus' presence is real. It is not a figment of our imagination. Interestingly, John has Jesus walk on the storm tossed sea while it is raging. He stays above the chaos without being destroyed by it. He doesn't even calm the storm in this instance. Experiencing Jesus' presence does not mean we won't have stormy days. It does not mean that peace and calm will be our automatic response when chaos threatens.

It does mean the one who walks beside us won't be overwhelmed by that chaos. It does mean if we place our trust in the God we know in Jesus we don't have to respond to tough times out of our fear. Drowning in chaos is not the only possibility.

When we combine these two stories we can see how being fed by the bread of life will give us the strength and hope necessary to handle those storms that always seem to come. It is those who have come to terms with their hungers who are in the best position to reject false ways of feeding those hungers, many of which come from scarcity thinking.

I'd like to close with another quote from Douglas John Hall. He says the real miracle is that "a human being could represent, by his words and deeds, such a sign of hope and healing that hundreds of needy people should follow him about, and feel that the hunger for 'the bread of life' had been assuaged. What is truly awe-inspiring is not that someone could walk on the surface of water without sinking, but that his presence among ordinary, insecure, and timid persons could calm their anxieties and cause them to walk where they feared to walk before-in the end, all the way to their own Golgothas."

The truly inspiring miracles of any day are changed lives, are those people who make the world a better place because they have come to terms with their hungers in healthy ways, are those people who overcome their fears in their walk of faith. Those are the miracles that inspire me. They remind me why I want to continue on my faith journey in spite of my cynical tendencies and nagging questions. They remind me God is bigger than my imagination. My little rational mind does not set the limits of what is possible. Amen