

“A TALE OF TWO BANQUETS, PART II

Mark 6:30-44 John 6:1-21 September 2, 2018

For those of you who have been wondering when I was going to get around to “A Tale of Two Banquets, Part II”, this is the day! It really hasn’t been that long- Part one was on August 12 and was part of the series titled “Healing Hands”. This is the last message of that series with the theme “Feed the World.” We began with the scripture from Mark 6:14-29 and the birthday banquet of King Herod where Salome asked for the head of John the baptizer on a platter.

Isn’t it strange? Herod’s horrible banquet runs right into the story where Jesus makes sure that everyone is fed. Mark is a very careful writer. He wants us to hear these two stories together. In Mark the story of Herod’s banquet is immediately followed by the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. It’s a story found in all four gospels. As Mark tells the story it’s filled with oppositions and contrasts:

Jesus withdrew to be alone...*But a great crowd followed him*

It was a deserted place...*But it became an abundant place*

The disciples said, “Send the people away.”...*Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.”*

We have only five loaves & two fish...*Yet more than 5000 ate with 12 baskets left over*

Did you hear the oppositions? *Alone...Crowd* *Deserted...Filled* *Send them away...Feed them* *Too little...More than enough* But the greatest contrast of all is between Jesus’ banquet of life and Herod’s banquet of death. Mark has placed these two stories side by side. He wants us to see the stark contrasts between two very different banquets.

In today’s gospels the feeding of the five thousand is Jesus’ response to the hunger of the people. He was not going to send them away from that mountain top hungry—not on his watch! They would be fed with the word and with food!

What are you hungry for? Right this moment, sitting in the pew...ask yourself this question: “What am I hungry for? And how hungry am I?” Whatever your response to that question, God cares about your hunger, your desire. God

cares about whatever it is you are longing for, hunting for, hoping for. If there's one thing to be said for certain about today's Gospel readings, it is surely this: God cares about your hunger.

It's important to God, this hunger, and the early church apparently knew it because this story of the feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle story of Jesus that gets told in all four gospels. There is no other story like that. For those early Christians, it clearly got to the heart of something they knew was important about this Jesus, about who he was and what he was up to, and what he found to be important.

Perhaps one reason for this is the obvious one. Hunger is a universal experience. From the moment we are born we are faced with it. It is a part of what all of us confront. This is not so true of the other stories about what Jesus was up to and what he did for people, , The other stories don't necessarily connect to what our own particular stories include. Not all of us are blind or deaf or plagued by spirits or unable to walk. Not all of us are grieving for our dead child, bent over in pain, or stuck in a sinking boat. Jesus attended to all of these needs and so many more.

But perhaps those needs feel apart from our needs, apart from what our own days are filled with or where our own hearts struggle. But hunger, hunger, now that's another thing. We all feel it. We all know it. It is incessant. It returns. It propels us to the things that give us life, or at least to the things that we think will give us life, to the things that quite literally we can't live without. We spend time and effort and energy of every kind on making it go away, on filling ourselves with something, on staving off our hunger and keeping it at bay.

Where is Jesus in all this? And what does this story say? In John's version, Jesus has been in Galilee healing the sick. The people have noticed the signs he's been up to, so a crowd follows him to the place where he's gone with his disciples. There are so many of them, and Jesus looks at Phillip and says, "Where are we to buy bread for all these people? They're hungry. So what are we going to do?" It's important to notice that in John's version Jesus asks the disciples, while in Matthew and Mark and Luke it's the other way around. The disciples ask him. In this case, Jesus looks at his followers, looks at the likes of you and me and says, "So what are we gonna do here? How are we going to deal with this problem of hunger?"

It is clear that Philip reaches for the usual kinds of categories and expectations. He begins to calculate how much money they need to buy supper for all these folks. He begins to work on logistics. “Half a year’s paychecks won’t do the trick. Our budget just isn’t big enough. Our resources are just too few.” But Jesus knows that conventional answers aren’t what’s called for here. Aren’t what’s really needed.

At this point, Andrew walks up. “Well, there is someone here,” he says. “There’s this kid with some barley loaves and a couple of fish.” Andrew looks at who’s around. Who’s on hand? Look at what’s available. And what’s available is the lunch of a boy who is clearly not a power broker, clearly not someone with rank. Because barley flour is the flour that poor folks used for their loaves, not what the rich folks used. It’s a little detail that only John mentions. Andrews sees that perhaps real needs aren’t necessarily filled by the folks that we’ve often looked to to meet them.

But Jesus is saying more than that. Jesus is saying that the hunger goes deeper. The way John tells the story, it’s clear that Jesus is the One who can end real hunger, of every sort, not just the kind that makes for growling stomachs an hour before lunchtime. Because John changes another detail in the story: He makes Jesus the host of this meal, the one who distributes the food. In the other gospels, it’s the disciples who take up the work, and those stories say important things, too. But, here for John, there’s something else going on. Something else we’re to hear and see and know. In this version, it’s Jesus who hands out the food.

The Rev. Grace Imathiu tells a story about using whatever is available for God’s service, working with the little we have to do a mighty thing: A few years ago I served as pastor of Lavington Church in Nairobi. One day three young men came to my office. Although they were cheerful, they looked tired and worn out. Their tennis shoes were dusty and their clothes needed a wash. The first thing they asked when they came into my office was whether they could sing a verse of “Amazing Grace” in their language. They sang acappella in parts. It was so beautiful. Sounded like angel music, the kind of singing that tugs at the soul and brings tears to your eyes out of the blue. And then they told me their story. They were university students from Rwanda, 23-year olds. Two of them had been medical students. When war broke out in their country, they had escaped with only the clothes on their back and the song in their heart. They had walked for weeks without a change of clothes or a place to sleep. They had often gone hungry, they said,

and they had no clue where any of their family members and friends were. They said they had learned to be grateful for their life each day and they had begun singing “Amazing Grace” as a prayer as they walked. They had seen so much violence and death and cruelty that they could not find words to pray so instead they sang “Amazing Grace” as they walked and they said, “God knew and that was enough.”

On that afternoon in my office, these three young men had come to church asking for assistance. They said they had found a room to rent for eight U.S. dollars a month. They were asking our congregation to help them with a month’s rent. Eight dollars and some money for food, a total of \$12 dollars a month. I asked the three students to come back in a few days so I could meet with the church leaders, and when I met my church leaders, they all agreed it was a great ministry. But someone talked about the budget. Someone said \$8 was not a lot, but if you multiplied by 12 months, the next thing you know, it would be impossible. And someone else suggested a very Andrew-like idea. “Let’s have a special project,” they said. “Let’s have a special offering. Let’s tell the congregation about the situation, have these young men sing one Sunday morning, and whoever in the congregation is willing to help, could donate outside the usual tithing and offertory.” The church leaders talked late into the night. Some were even concerned that so many refugees were in the city that the word would spread our church was involved in paying rent and buying groceries and we would be swamped with needs. Some wanted to keep church and revivals only on a spiritual level. No handing out food, no meals.

As I listened to my church leaders, I learned so much about the myth of limited resources. We often think there’s just enough for some of us. Some have to go without. We’re worried we’ll run out, but guess what? God’s world has enough for all of us. Someone has put it well, saying, “There is enough for all of our needs, but there is not enough for all our greed.”

So what’s with us? We know all of this, fact is, we are so very like Phillip and Andrew, counting the cost and wringing our hands over the impossibility of it all. We so often imitate the disciples rather than the Lord who calls us to imitate him. That day on the mountain side, there was enough for everybody and even leftovers. And all were fed. No one went hungry.

Please pray with me. Oh, God, here’s my few fish and loaves. Help me to be generous with the gifts you have given me that all might be fed. Amen.