

Proper 13A RCL –August 2, 2020

The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton

When our gospel begins, Jesus has just heard the terrible, bloody story about how his cousin John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod, the governor. John told Herod that it was immoral for him to be carrying on with his brother's wife. And so Herod, who did not care about what was moral or immoral, had John thrown into jail – a troublemaker.

At Herod's birthday party, he strayed once again and he took a fancy to his stepdaughter, Salomé, and asked her to dance for his guests. The dance was apparently something one might see at the Penthouse Club up in Port Richmond. Encouraged by her mother behind the scenes, the price Salome charged for her dance was the head of John the Baptist. Even after the dance was finished and Herod did his best to talk her out of this gory payment, Salome insisted. And so John's head was delivered to her at the party, on a platter.

Why do I start with this story, which is so deeply disturbing? Because I want you to feel the incredible contrast of our two dinner stories, both of which happened within a day or so. Jesus' dear cousin was murdered, his body desecrated, the laughingstock of a drunken birthday party. Very shortly thereafter, the insatiable crowds surround Jesus, wanting to be cured, wanting to hear the Good News. And the gracious and expansive dinner for five thousand households which followed could not possibly be more different.

It is here that our gospel for today begins to unfold for the people of five thousand households: men, women and children. Jesus has been healing these people the entire day, a long line waiting for him, for his word, for his touch. The disciples come to him at evening and suggest that he send the people away so they could find food. Jesus suggests that the *disciples* give them something to eat. Apparently they have already thought of this, for they have surveyed the crowd and found that there is little food to be had, just five small loaves and two fish. Jesus says, "Bring them here to me." And then the story becomes miraculous.

You may recall that the Bible says that Jesus asks the people to "sit down." But in fact, the Greek word used here is curious, and it doesn't mean, "sit." It means, "recline." Think Masterpiece Theater, / *Claudius*, or old blockbuster movies of the Roman Empire. You remember those images of ancient people reclining at fancy dinner parties, lying on their sides or their stomachs, like spokes on a wheel, facing a centerpiece heaped with food and wine. No members of the upper class nobility would have *sat up* to dine. It just wasn't done! And no ordinary peasant or farmer would have ever thought of *reclining* to eat. That wasn't done either.

It was also expected that there be an honored and famous guest at these dinner parties, someone to present an argument or a philosophical claim. The dinner went on for hours while guests offered their opinions and argued over the claims presented. Common people would sometimes gather outside the gate of a courtyard where these dinners took place, and listen in. They were the uninvited guests, and they stood on their feet for hours, craning their necks to hear what was being said.

Back to our story. Jesus launches this whole miraculous experience with two reminders about the Kingdom of Heaven. First, the Kingdom of Heaven is a place where everyone is equal and highly valued, where the commonest and most ordinary of people will be given places of dignity and honor. There are no people standing outside the gate straining to hear. The Kingdom of Heaven is where the most ordinary, everyday people are invited to recline alongside the rich, the famous and the well-educated. And they too receive their own generous portion of the inexhaustible five small loaves, and two little fish.

And so Jesus performs that four-fold act that includes taking the bread in his hands, blessing, breaking, and finally, sharing it. How were those five small loaves and two fish ever going to feed all those people? Jesus knew that God could provide, and God did just that. Because on countless past occasions, God had always provided what was needed: a ram for Abraham and Isaac to sacrifice, suddenly visible in a nearby thicket, manna and quail in the wilderness, water springing from a rock for the thirsty people of Israel. And on countless more occasions.

The second reminder of the nature of the kingdom of Heaven comes in Jesus instruction: “You give them something to eat.” The disciples, who could not see how it could be possible – they are the “you.” They fed all those people not because of their own strength but because God gave it, in order to accomplish God’s purpose, which was to attend to even the most basic need of God’s people.

In these unfamiliar times, in this unpredictable pandemic, God’s lovingkindness toward God’s people is completely and totally predictable. God is working God’s purpose out, to feed the hungry millions through the individual contributions from all of you. Ministry continues to happen, not because we have the strength or understanding of how it happens, but because God gives what is needed to accomplish God’s purposes. Stressed in so many ways by this pandemic, we still find ourselves refreshed by God, knowing we are capable of more. I’ve heard so many of you refer to yourselves as blessed. And so we are – many of us still employed, able to survive these strange times.

And so you drop off bags of food. Sometimes just one bag, sometimes several bags. And it joins the bags that others bring, and those bags are transported by some of you to our outreach partners. At our outreach partners, other churches and community groups have joined the effort and have also dropped off food. And volunteers take it, give thanks and bless it, break it into bags and boxes, and share it with at least five thousand households, and more. And those households are fed by God’s grace and by Jesus’ instruction “You find them something to eat.” And so those volunteers do just that, in the certainty that on their volunteer day, some church or community group will pull up with a carload of food.

Last week Maurice reminded us that the Kingdom of Heaven relies on everyday things, everyday people, and small things that grow and flourish. This is what happens to the single bag of food you drop off at the Chapel doors. A simple bag of food which by God’s grace, grows and flourishes along with what God is calling other people to do, and suddenly, hunger and food security are defeated, one hour at a time. And we must not let up on these contributions, because a miracle is happening.

We don’t know how this ancient miracle happened on the hillside, we just know God enabled it to happen. And truly, we don’t need to know how it happened. The more we try to figure it out, the more it weakens the miracle. Our job is not to be analytical, rather, it is to marvel at what the Kingdom of God is like. And we know, that because Jesus said “YOU give them something to eat,” that if we continue to offer what we have to others, the miracle continues. May it never end.