

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
July 30, 2006

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: 2Kings 4:42-44, Psalm 145:10-19, Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

There are only a few incidents of Jesus' life and ministry that are told in all four of the Gospels. Each Gospel writer was addressing a different audience and chose to approach the telling of the story of Jesus in slightly different ways. Today's Gospel, the story of the feeding of the 5000, is one of those stories. With only slight variations, this story is found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That tells me that this story, of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes, enough to feed thousands, is so central to who Jesus was and what his ministry was about that none of the Gospel writers could tell the story of Jesus without including this day.

When John is writing his version of the story of Jesus, he refers to all the deeds of wonder (healing, and stilling storms, and multiplying loaves and fishes) as signs, signs intended to reveal the character of God and to evoke faith in the God Jesus reveals. Which got me to wondering, "if these "signs" reveal the nature of God, what does this sign, this multiplying of food and feeding the multitude, tell us about God?

For one thing, I think it reveals that God can and does produce abundance. I think of the wagon loads of grain that would be harvested from the farms where I grew up. I think of all the different types of crops that are grown, all that abundance. And even when there is a drought or flood in one part of the country or of the world, there are other parts that have plenty and to spare. God gives abundantly.

The second thing this story of the 5000 reveals to me is that God desires that everyone be fed from this abundance. Notice that Jesus tells the disciples to get the people to sit down. There is no line formed so that some are first and others last. There are not territories, no select few. They all sit down to partake in this deed of wonder in which they all are fed with abundance.

Now, in my book, that leads directly to an unavoidable question. If that's what God is like, if God provides abundance and desires that all are fed, why is there still hunger? Why do so many children still go to bed hungry? Why are there still people dying of malnutrition? The exact statistics vary, but the simple fact of the matter is that in our world, in our country, in our state, in our city, there are still people who don't share in the abundance God provides. There are people who don't get enough food to eat. Why is that?

That question reminds me of the cartoon of two turtles. One says to the other, "Sometimes I'd like to ask why God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it. The other turtle replies, "I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.

Here at Emanuel we tend to take two pretty traditional approaches to addressing the issue of hunger. From time to time we have a campaign to support LWR's World Hunger Appeal. And secondly, we run the Food Pantry. That is our own little loaves and fishes

story. The church provides about \$100 per month to support this ministry, but the Food Pantry spends about \$1000 a month on food. The rest just “shows up” in the form of donations, both food and money. God is doing a lot through us to feed the hungry among us.

But at some point, it seems to me, there has to be another step. Handing a person a bag of food only goes so far. At some point, we have to ask what causes some to go hungry. We have to try to address those causes. Locally that means trying to address the problem of drugs and addiction, and discrimination and the illegalization of immigration. Globally, that means addressing the issue of unequal distribution and consumption of the world’s resources.

Once again, there are tons of statistics about the wealth of the world and how it is distributed and the exact figures will vary. But the simple fact of the matter is that some countries, ours included, use up a disproportionate share of the abundance of earth’s resources. The best way I’ve seen to illustrate that, (which I have occasionally used with Confirmation kids) is to set out 10 chairs, and get 10 volunteers. One of the volunteers gets to sit on, have possession of, 9 chairs. And the nine volunteers have to figure out how to share the one remaining chair. Needless to say, none of nine get much chance to sit down.

At some point we have to come to understand that there is something inherently wrong with that. We need to get hearts that break over that kind of injustice. We need the desire and the courage to do something about it. We need attitude and creativity, maybe like that of the mayor of New York back in the 30’s, in the height of the Depression. His name was Fiorello LaGuardia, and the story is told of the night in 1936 when he showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night a tattered old woman, charged with stealing a loaf of bread, was brought before him. She defended herself by saying, "My daughter's husband has deserted her. She is sick, and her children are starving."

The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, saying, "It's a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she's got to be punished to teach other people a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the old woman and said, "I've got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail. "However, even while pronouncing sentence, LaGuardia reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill, and threw it into his hat with these famous words: "Here's the ten-dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day, a New York newspaper reported: "Forty-seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Making forced donations were a red-faced storekeeper, seventy petty criminals, and a few New York policemen.

That’s the sort of thing I’m talking about. That’s the sort of thing that we followers of Jesus need to be about. We need to be profoundly dis-satisfied with the state of affairs, enough that we get up and do something about it.

Now, maybe it's just me, but when I think about that daunting task of taking a next step, I feel convicted. I feel convicted for having been satisfied with putting on Band-Aids when the patient needed to get to the hospital. I feel convicted for complaining and not moving to take some kind of action. I think about going and getting involved somewhere like the Dallas Peace Center or with the Dallas Area Progressive Christian Association to address the big underlying problems like poverty and war. But I just get overwhelmed by all the other responsibilities I already have; I just can't imagine adding in one more thing.

And then I think of a quote I came across one time. A guy by the name of Phillip Brooks once said, "Don't pray for easy lives, pray to be stronger people. Don't pray for tasks equal to your power, pray for powers equal to your tasks." That power doesn't come from us. That power is the power St. Paul is talking about when he talks about "the power at work in us" which is the Holy Spirit, who is able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

We each are called to live into that promise. We each are called to come forward with our meager resources: time, energy, know-how, people skills, and we are called to let God take our gifts, bless them, and use them to feed the starving multitudes. Amen