

We have but five loaves and two fish
Matthew 14:13-21, Pentecost 7, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

The tension mounts; the stakes get higher; the odds become stacked toward failure. That's the way their situation appears to the apostles this morning.

Things started simply enough. Some months ago this group of twelve had heard the voice of Jesus, and they began following him. They listened and learned, and the words that Jesus spoke—the compassion he embodied—began to change them. Then he sends them out on a missionary journey of their own, and they meet with some success. The Gospel tells us that on their mission they teach, they cast out demons, and they heal the sick. They make it back to Jesus, excited but also exhausted and threadbare, and he receives them with love. He teaches them and the crowd parables about doing the will of God as if to say to the Twelve, “Good work!” But then, just before today's reading he and they hear about the murder of John the Baptist by Herod, and they are all reminded how quickly one's diligent and faithful work can be snuffed out. At this news, Jesus needs time for rest and prayer, and he takes a boat to a deserted place on the far side of the Sea of Galilee.

When he gets there, instead of rest he finds the twelve disciples and a hungry crowd, hungry in every way, that have hoofed it around the lake ahead of the boat. The people come because their souls are famished, and now that they've traveled so from home their stomachs are famished, too. It is a desolate place, and the hour is late, and as the wearied apostles look out over the mass of people, they realize in a moment of clarity and self-examination that they are not up to the task of feeding the horde. The apostles have recently completed a successful missionary journey for Jesus. Success is now their barometer, and they can tell that here they will fail. The apostles quickly panic. They lapse into resignation and defeat. “You cannot do it; you cannot do it” the broken record says in their heads. “You are not Jesus; you are not good enough or strong enough. There are too many people, and their needs are too great.” One gets the sense that the spiritual need of this crowd scares the apostles as much as the physical, but growling stomachs are an easy excuse, and the twelve go to Jesus and say, “Teacher, let's get these folks out of here. There's nothing to forage, and they're starving. Get them to leave and go find themselves some nourishment.”

The apostles' anxiety does not abate when Jesus innocently answers, with no tongue-in-cheek, “They need not go away; *you* feed them.”

The predictable “hubbada-hubbas” follow, as the apostles give their reasons for not being up to the task. Jesus is patient with his friends, but it is important to notice how his patience manifests itself. Jesus does not sit the apostles down and help them plot a logistical model for success. He does not ask, “Well, what’s your plan of action?” or “Have you developed a rationing schedule?” or even “Do any among you have the skills and training to accomplish this task?” He simply asks, in essence, “What do you have to offer?”

Still conflicted and anxious, the apostles go through the crowd and collect what they can find, and they lay it at the feet of Jesus: five small loaves and two fish. It is their honest oblation, the sum total of what they have to give. Jesus takes this offering, and he enacts for the first time a pattern that we will see later in the Upper Room and which we repeat each and every Sunday at the Holy Eucharist. Jesus takes the loaves and the fish. He blesses them; he breaks them; and he gives them to the hungry crowd. The Gospel tells us that after all were filled there were twelve full baskets left over.

What is this story about? It comes up a lot in the lectionary, and we usually focus on the multiplication that takes place or the ways in which the hunger of the crowd is satisfied. We seldom focus on what happens from the perspective of the *apostles*, a miracle in its own right and one that has much more bearing on our own lives than any other aspect of this story.

The story is about a group of twelve people who have the best intentions but believe in their hearts that they are not up to the task. It is about Jesus gently drawing their focus away from the vast and paralyzing need spread out before them and toward the gifts that they have to give. It is about consecrating those gifts through Jesus’ own blessing and then giving them to the world, which magnifies their effect with a power infinite in goodness and love.

This is as good as news can get, for me and you as much as for the apostles. I know that not a week goes by that I don’t at some point experience a moment of paralysis at the work that is before me. A parishioner will come with some need, or a vexing passage of Scripture will present itself, or something will happen in the world that threatens my faith. Not a week goes by that I don’t feel so flawed and inadequate that I imagine that *anyone* would be better suited to this work to which I am called than me. The anxiety mounts, and the odds seem stacked toward failure.

Do you have those moments in your life, your Christian life? Do you have them in your parenting, in meeting the needs of work or your friends, in contemplating getting involved in the life of the Church?

What is the miracle in that dark and desolate place near the banks of the Sea of Galilee? It is that Jesus does not require of us great skill or charisma or confidence. All that Jesus requires is that we lay at his feet whatever it is that we have to offer. It may seem to us as small and insignificant as five little loaves and two meager fish. It may seem wholly insufficient to feed the masses. But no matter. Because Jesus will take our oblation. He will bless it; in his hands he will break apart our preconceived notions of our own inadequacy and fear; and infused with his grace he will give what we have to offer to those in need.

Jesus can do this because it is what God has done with Jesus himself. In Gethsemane, even Jesus anguished over the magnitude of what he had to do. And yet God consecrated his body, broken on the cross, and gave it in love. That small offering, on a tiny hill outside a provincial city in an insignificant corner of the empire, fed the whole world.

It is not ours to fret about the results. It is not ours to give in to the anxiety that sets its sights on the outcome. It is ours to set our sights on Christ and to offer our love and labor at his feet. He will do the rest.

In just a few short weeks school will start and the program year will begin at St. John's in earnest. There are hungry masses, and those to whom Jesus will look to feed them are *right here*. We are sitting in *these* pews and standing in *this* pulpit. We are like the Twelve; there is no one else.

Jesus' words will be proclaimed to us that day, and we will be called to take whatever gifts we have: a few small fish, little loaves of bread, an afternoon a week of our time, the simple skills of polishing brass or talking with youth—whatever it might be that we have to offer—and feed those hungry souls. There is no one else. Jesus says to us, "*You* feed them," and he will bless and magnify our work.

They brought the loaves and the fish to Jesus. He looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled.

Amen.