



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 10 – Proper 12 Year B**

#### **Take, Bless, Break, Give**

**[RCL]: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21**

You might be tempted to gloss over the miracle stories about Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. Taken at face value, most of them stretch our credulity, perhaps further than we are willing to go, and for what? Is it necessary to believe that Jesus really walked on water, or magically multiplied the loaves and fishes? Why do we keep telling these improbable stories?

The story we heard in the Gospel of John today — about Jesus feeding the 5,000 — stands out in the Gospels. The Gospel writers clearly thought this story was important. It shows up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke — since these three share a common source and repeat a lot of material, this is not surprising. But John also includes it, which is interesting, because there's not much overlap between John and the other Gospels. And on top of that, Matthew and Mark like this story so much that they tell it twice! The second telling is almost identical, except in that version only 4,000 people are fed. The point is, this story about feeding the multitudes was important enough to make it into the Gospels six times. And there are only four Gospels.

Let's dig in and see if we can discover why the Gospel writers thought this story was so important. To begin: it's more than a miracle story. In the Gospel writers' hands, the miracle becomes a parable. The feeding of the 5,000 is a parable about what we are called to do and who we are called to be. If we are going to follow Jesus, at some point, he's going to turn to us and say: You give them something to eat. And it matters how we respond to his command.

The more you begin to imagine the world of this story, the more you see that it's not about magic at all. It's about how we see the world, and what we do with what we already have. In a way, the magic has already happened: God has already given us a world out of nothing, already provided sun and earth and water and seeds—how much more magic do we need? Everything we have comes from God and will return to God.

God provides something out of nothing. That is the basic story of creation, and it is the way God provided manna for his people in the wilderness. But this story is different. Jesus does not make something out of

nothing here. No — he takes what God has already provided. He draws out the resources that are already present in the community.

John has altered one important detail in the way he tells the story. In each of the other Gospels, it isn't Jesus who asks, "Where are we to buy bread?" Instead, that question belongs to the disciples — and in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when the disciples ask this question, Jesus turns to them and says, "You give them something to eat."

But of course, the disciples can see that feeding so many people would be impossible. As Andrew points out, all they can find is five barley loaves and two fish belonging to a boy in the crowd. But then, Jesus gets them to see what's there with new eyes. The disciples are coming from a place of fear, of scarcity: there will never be enough! Six month's wages would not buy enough bread to feed them! What Jesus shows us is that, whatever we have, whatever God has already given us, is always enough. If we look at it in the right way. If we decide to share. If we let go of our fear and stop holding onto to what's "ours" so tightly. If we can do those things, we absolutely have enough bread to feed the whole world.

And, it turns out, to throw a really big party. Imagine this crowd that Jesus confronts. Jesus sees a backyard cookout for 5,000 people, a picnic with everyone spread out on the grass, enjoying the sunset on the lakeshore and the cool evening breeze. That's how Jesus wants us to see the world: 5,000 people on the lakeshore isn't a problem, it's a party. Whatever we brought with us is what we have to share, and there's plenty for everyone, and more left over besides. This is a pretty compelling picture of what the Kingdom of God is like.

Here's another way of looking at it: this story about feeding the five thousand is the first supper, instead of the last supper. Jesus sat down and broke bread with his friends many times over the course of his ministry, not just that last night in the upper room. It's important to remember that the last supper is not the only Eucharistic feast in the Gospels. Every time Jesus broke bread with friends, it was a thanksgiving meal (for that is what eucharist means—thanksgiving).

Jesus follows the same pattern at this first supper as he does at the last supper. Here is how Mark records the scene: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds." Take, bless, break, give: those are the actions of the eucharistic feast. Jesus wants us to take what we have, whatever it is, whatever's already here, and bless it: in other words, give it to God. And then break it open, divide it up, and give it away. Joyfully. So that all will have enough.

Jesus does this with bread, every time he shares a meal. And he does this with his life: lives it for God, breaks it open, gives it to us. And this is what Jesus wants with our lives too: You give them something to eat. It's not enough to simply pray that God will change things, will feed the hungry and clothe the naked. God needs us to participate in this eucharistic action. God is calling us to take our lives, and bless them, and be broken open, and then given away in service of others.

It's the breaking that can be hard to face. But you cannot be a follower of Jesus without the risk of being broken. Serving a meal to a homeless person or taking communion to someone dying of cancer — sometimes, such an encounter is going to break your heart. It would be easier to stay safe where you never have to face that reality. But we don't have that option: you give them something to eat.

Take, bless, break, give. No matter how hard or impossible this seems, the end result is worth it: everyone ate until they were satisfied, and when they gathered up what was left over, they filled twelve baskets. This vision is possible. We already have what we need, right here in our midst. The Kingdom is waiting to be born. Will you join in this eucharist?

Amen.

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