

Rev. Sara Ilderton
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Year B//Pentecost +9, 2021 (St. Mark, Charlotte)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is the only miracle that occurs in all four gospels...the feeding of the 5,000...the only one.

Water into Wine –

happens in John, but not in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

Stilling the storm...

happens in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but not in John

(In John, Jesus walks on water – but doesn't still the storm).

Jesus cleanses lepers in Matthew, Mark and Luke –

but not in John.

On the other hand,

Jesus heals the blind man by the pool in John,

but not in the other gospels.

There are plenty others...But, you get the idea.

Just this one miracle is in all of them.

And in all of the tellings of it, there are five loaves and two fish.

In all of them, there is more than enough –

so much so that there are 12 basketsful of pieces leftover...says so in all of four of the gospels.

But there **are** some things that **are** (*not surprisingly*) unique to John.

Only John makes explicit mention of the Passover being near...

with its remembrance of God hearing the cries of God's people

and acting to bring liberation to those in bondage to the superpower of the day.

The Passover with its re-telling year after year after

of God's presence throughout in the wilderness by day and night

and God's providence in ensuring that God's people have enough for their daily bread

as they move step by step toward liberation...toward freedom.

Only in **John's** telling of this miracle do we get the detail

that the bread that was provided along with the fish (the five loaves), were **barley** loaves...

The kind of bread poor people could afford.

And it is fragments of this *bread of the poor* that are gathered

so that nothing, not even that may be lost.

And only in **John's** telling is it Jesus who does the distributing...the serving.

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These differences are *intentional*, of course.

These differences mean to speak into the reality that was being experienced by John's audience...

those who heard and retold this story.

Folks who had been cast out of the synagogue for their desire to expand the reach of God's love

and care and compassion **beyond** the bounds of the strict religious purity and exclusions
that were practiced by the pious Jews of that day.

They were folks who were, in a very real sense, **homeless** and wandering and lost.

It is a story of hope and promise...

Like a great picture book told to hearers who needed to be reminded that,

regardless of what they may be experiencing –

regardless of what they had been told and *maybe had even begun to believe* –

that they are not worthy to be in the presence of this God,

that this God is the god of the elite and the right believing and the pure,

the God of those who say loud prayers

and wear the fancy robes...

This is a story of hope and promise...a story that says,

“No! What you have been told...what you have experienced is wrong!

This story is yours...This *Passover* story –

of liberation and care and feeding and movement toward life.

This story is *yours!*

God has heard your cries...you who are part of the large crowd.

And in case you missed that point...

In case you thought that only the rich were worthy to gather together

to rehear and re-claim this story of freedom...

In case you think you are too poor, that this is meant only for the wealthy...

Here, we'll turn the page, and see?

See what that man is holding?

See what that man is lifting in thanksgiving

and then giving for the nourishment of the hungry?

He is feeding them, not with just any loaves, but with *barley* loaves...

This is your food...This is your story.

I wrote it and am writing it with you in mind,” God says.

“You are seen.

You are seen and you are known and here, **look, come, taste** I am here,” God says.

“I am right here, in the life and love of that man.

The one giving thanks for you and all that you bring

and feeding you with his very own hands.

And ensuring that all that is left is gathered up...

for even that is precious and must not be lost...

even the **poor leftovers** of the poor.”

And when it was all over, and everyone wanted to make him king, right?

wanted to put him in a box...

When that happens,

Jesus goes away to the mountain by himself.

And the disciples build a fire
and tell stories about the day
and how incredible it was to be there...
and they sleep soundly through the night
and in the morning, they get in the boat with Jesus and head out.
Except that they don't.

They have had this incredible experience,
witnessed a miracle, been fed along with thousands of others,
and now Jesus has gone up a mountain to rest,
I imagine, maybe get his thoughts together and what do the disciples do?
They get in the boat and take off as it's getting dark.

Did they not realize that they'd left him?

I say that as if it is hard to believe that anyone could ever do such a thing...

Take off without realizing you've left someone behind.

But, let's be honest...We all have that story...

In my family, it's my sister.

To hear her tell it, it happens all the time.

Truthfully, it hasn't happened ***that*** often...

But there was this one time, that we had all come together at Christmas.

And it had become something of a tradition to go to a movie after we'd all eaten.

So, after we ate, we piled into our cars.

And there were enough of us to have two...maybe three...cars.

And we all thought that Leslie was in the other's car!

Even her husband, by the way!

Then it was like we all realized it at the same time when we were all stopped side by side
at a traffic light that was red and rolled down our windows and said,

"Do you have her?"

"We don't have her. Do you have her?"

It was hilarious!

Or, ***we*** all thought it was funny.

She didn't find it very amusing!

And when we got to the parking lot of the theater, we all did "nose goes"

because none of us wanted to go get her and deal with the ramifications.

And I know that sounds ridiculous and maybe irrelevant, except it's not.

I mean, sure, my sister isn't Jesus, but the reality is,

we walk away from Jesus all the time.

Sometimes intentionally.

Sometimes, likely most often, *at least for me*, not.

Sometimes...sometimes it's just evening

and I've had a really long day

and I'm tired and I'm not thinking,

and I row away without even realizing I've left him.

Then, before I know it it's dark –

which, in scripture means it's unmanageable and chaotic – whatever the **"it"** is.

And all of the sudden it feels like I have been cast out –

and I'm wandering and feeling homeless

and like the story that I thought was for **me** is going on without me.

And I get scared.

And then the one that I have walked away from – that very one – comes to me and says,

"Don't be afraid."

Then, just like those who wanted to make him king, I try to control him and take him into my boat...

which he won't do.

But he will get me off the chaotic water

and walk me onto the solid ground where he will give me some food...

barley food (which is good...because at that point, I'm feeling pretty poor.).

And he just does that...over and over and over.

We walk or row or run away,

or we get cast **out** and cast **off** and Jesus comes to us in the chaos or on the hillside

over and over.

The hymn should really say, "Just as I am YOU come" right?

Over and over and over...constantly moving toward us.

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This story is for you.

At your very poorest, neediest, most pitiful, hungriest...

when you are surrounded by darkness and chaos such that you are sure you will drown...

even when it is your own fault!

Jesus comes. Still!

In surprising, even startling ways...in bread and wine, yes...

And in the eyes of a stranger,

or laughter or tears

or encouragers who make you brave and hold your hand.

He comes...

to feed and sustain you and to carry you through onto dry land.

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May you receive the food you are given

– literally or metaphorically,

knowing that the one who provides it *sees* you

and knows you **and** your dark chaos

and will **still and always** come to feed you

even if you have rowed far, far away.

May you know that it is meant to heal what is hungry in you.

And having been fed, may you feed the hungry ones.