



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

PROPER 12B

2 KINGS 4:42-44

PSALM 145:10-19

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

JOHN 6:1-21

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

JULY 25, 2021

IN the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
AMEN

There are two questions in today's readings which I find striking in their similarity.

From 2 Kings: "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

And its partner from John 6: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

I am drawn to these questions for a reason. If you recall our readings from three weeks ago, when Jesus faces rejection at his hometown of Nazareth and commissions his disciples, there was a short sentence which set up the entire framework for a particular stage in Jesus' ministry.

"Jesus was amazed at their unbelief."

I reference this because, even though we've switched from the gospel of Mark to the gospel of John for now, I see how the persistence of unbelief was one of the primary obstacles in Jesus ministry. Even in the readings from today, after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, after the disciples had to literally gather up the aftermath of the abundance of God's

blessing with their own hands, they still believe Jesus will leave them to die on the stormy sea. Almost immediately after they saw their doubts blown out of the water by the miraculous feeding of the multitude, they return to doubt.

The crowd's no better. You watch; two, three, four weeks from now, the crowd which was fed and wanted to forcibly crown Jesus as king, the crowd which pursues him to the other side of the lake, hungry for a wonderworking ruler directly tapped into the bountiful goodness of God...that crowd leaves. Doubts. Grumbles and complains.

Time and time again, Jesus seeks to show those around him that the kingdom of God is among them, as Mother Stacey mentioned last week, and they simply refuse to believe it. No matter what Jesus did or said, short term wonder always gave way to the much more familiar reflex of cynical unbelief.

And before we think we're any more spiritually mature than all of the characters we read about, I wonder how many sermons will be preached today which say that the feeding of the five thousand wasn't a miracle, strictly speaking. The generous example of the young boy simply inspired everyone in the crowd to give up their individual meals as well, producing a crowd-sourced abundance. The miracle, some of us

are tempted to read, is in the spread of generosity, not in anything supernatural.

But it's easy to put the crowd, or the disciples, or other preachers in the hot seat. For this text to have any real insight for us, it's time, I think, to shine a light on you and me.

“Certainly, says St Augustine of this text, “the government of the whole world is a greater miracle than the satisfying of five thousand men with five loaves; and yet no (one) wonders at the former; but the latter (people) wonder at, not because it is greater, but because it is rare. For who even now feeds the whole world, but (God) who creates the cornfield from a few grains? ...The power, indeed, was in the hands of Christ; but those five loaves were as seeds...”

I read those words, and they stopped me in my tracks for a moment. And then the realization hit me.

As a matter of course, when I think about how I go about my daily life, I think, more often than not, the only way to accurately describe my behavior is as ‘theoretically theist, but functionally atheist.’

Sure, I have no problem saying that God can set the universe in motion, keep the planets from crashing

into each other, keep the stars in the sky, etc. That's all fine.

But to say that God can take the very small seeds of my life, my energies, my abilities and \*USE THEM\* in a tangible way in the world around me? I might say I want that conceptually, but do I act like I believe that something so rare could actually happen?

Were I to take the place of the young boy with the five barley loaves and the two small fish in the Gospel of John, I think the crowd would have gone home hungry that day. I think if I really examine my behavior as someone who professes to follow and trust and BELIEVE in Jesus, more often than not, I'm the one looking down at the assorted fragments of my life and asking: "But what are they among so many people?" Do I really trust God to take my meager abilities and actually \*do\* something with them? No, I'd better hold on to them, watch over them carefully with a mindset of scarcity rather than of abundance, ration my energy, protect myself. God might've proven God's abundance and desire to use people in the story of salvation, but that was then, not now. That's for other people, not me.

I don't think this unbelief, this functional atheism, is intentionally malicious or devious. But I do think it's based in fear.

Can I offer the small seeds of my life to God and trust that God will, in St Augustine's words, do something rare with them? Or will I come up short, burn out, or look like a fool for hoping and believing that God actually cares about my life and our world, and acted on that belief?

Because if we did actually believe, and we actually lived like it, who knows what God would do? Even more terrifyingly, who know what God would ask of us, how much God would ask us to let go of, how much God would ask us to trust?

But this is precisely what we are called to as Christians. We are called to be the fools who actually believe in the power of the Gospel to change the human heart, the fools who proclaim the promise of good news to the poor in an age of income inequality, who proclaim release to the captives in an age of mass incarceration, who proclaim freedom to the oppressed in the age of systemic racism. We are the ones called to cast all that we are, even if it feels like meager seeds or some leftover loaves and fishes, into the abundant hands of Jesus Christ, and then work as if we believe these promises are actually true.

Either our God is abundant and real enough to use our lives for our good and God's glory, or the God we

worship is small enough to be contained by the restraints of our cynicism and doubt.

I choose to believe the former. And my prayer for myself and for all of you in our journey of faith as disciples of Jesus is best expressed in Paul's prayer for the Christian in Ephesus:

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

Amen.

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