



SAINT LUKE'S

“REAL NEEDS, REAL PEOPLE”

PROPER 12B

2 KINGS 4:42-44

PSALM 145

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

JOHN 6:1-21

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Jesus is not afraid of the real needs of real people. Today he addresses an essential human need – food. One thing I find so inspiring about Jesus is that he never runs away from human need or suffering. There are instances where he slips away from a crowd.¹ There are also several times when Jesus withdraws to pray alone.² In today's gospel he escapes to avoid being crowned king. But not once in Scripture does Jesus run away from a human suffering or need - mental illness, sickness, even death. Jesus faces down all of it.³ Jesus never says: "I cannot face this need; it is too challenging, too great". This is not to say Jesus doesn't *feel* overwhelmed at times. Yet every time Jesus faces daunting situations and formidable odds, the first thing Jesus does is stand there. That is part of what makes Jesus the Good Shepherd. There is nothing that would cause Jesus to desert his flock.

This is very important. If Jesus cannot help us cope with real human needs and crises, then frankly, there are a bunch of self-help resources and a cafeteria of philosophies that are just as useful as the gospel.

Life is unpredictable. We face change and transition, sometimes overwhelming physical, emotional, mental challenges in our lives and the lives of loved ones. And on any given day, in the world around us there is untold suffering and insufficient help. The first thing Jesus models for us today is what to do in the face of crushing need. We don't avoid it, or pretend it isn't there, or run away. If we are following Jesus, we stand there.

¹ Luke 4:29-30 for instance when the people of Nazareth want to throw him over a cliff.

² eg. Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 5:16

³ eg. Lazarus in John 11; eg. Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:22ff; Luke 8:41ff; eg. the centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5ff; Luke 7:2ff.

Next, like Jesus, we take stock. We ask the questions we need to ask. What do we have here? And like Jesus, as people of faith what we are doing is an inventory of what God has already provided. What are the resources - of people, of material things - that are at hand? We don't scoff at anything already given to us, we don't belittle anything, even if it seems pitifully inadequate.

Third - we give thanks for what is there, even when it doesn't seem like enough. Two fish and five loaves among 5000! Seriously. I can imagine the disciples almost rolling their eyes as Jesus gives thanks (Greek: *eucharistein*) over the loaves and fishes, as they gaze out over the sea of hungry faces. Presumably, Jesus could have prayed for a supermarket, but no, he prays over what is in front of him - and I think that includes all the people waiting to be fed.

Giving thanks for what God has provided is a spiritual discipline. It is not easy when the needs seem much bigger than the resources, but we give thanks anyway. As St. Paul says: *Give thanks in all circumstances*⁴ - not for all circumstances but *in all circumstances*. Paul adds: *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*. Paul explicitly connects discipleship with giving thanks. We don't have to fake gratitude, but we do need to remember that God never leaves us on our own. This was one of a former mentor's frequent sayings: "God never leaves us high and dry. You can count on it". So we put words to our thanksgiving, our Eucharists. Either prayers of thanksgiving in our hearts or - like Jesus - out loud. The glass may be at least half empty but there is always

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:18

something in the glass. And that “something” may turn out by God’s grace and mercy, to be enough. God can turn our tiny resources, our faith the size of a mustard seed, our despair, our sadness, into enough for today, and for all our tomorrows. One interpretation of the feeding of the 5000 is simply that people were inspired by the offering of loaves and fishes to share the food they had brought with them. So the moral is: “It’s never enough until you start to give it away”. However, for me the first part is: “It’s never enough until you give thanks for what you have.”

Finally, Jesus shows us that when we cannot predict the outcome ahead of time, when we are faced with overwhelming odds - act as though God is God. That is what faith is - walking not by sight but by God’s promises. John’s gospel - the last of the four to be written down - has such a high Christology that the Divinity of Christ is always uppermost and Jesus always has foreknowledge and a plan. But this miracle is in all four gospels and if we read the other gospels,⁵ it is not so clear that Jesus knows the plan. There is a back and forth with the other disciples about where to get food and Jesus asks *them* to figure it out. Jesus may not have known what exactly would happen as he gives thanks over the food, but he prays and acts as though God will make a way. And God does, time after time.

However, we do have to surrender our definitions of God’s providence. This sounds obvious if we admit God alone is God, but it is often a challenge for me - and perhaps for you too? “God knows what God is

⁵ Matthew 14:15ff; Mark 6:34ff; Luke 9:12ff.

doing” to me looks like this: every church in the country is packed to overflowing. “God knows what God is doing” looks like: There are no refugees and no separated families. “God knows what God is doing” looks like: there are no shootings in malls and schools. And our loved ones are always in complete health of mind, body and spirit. We are asked to trust that God will make a blessing from whatever is at hand, and it may or may not take the form we have prayed for. But God always provides a path forward. Like Jesus, we are invited to pray and act as though God is God. We walk and we pray at the same time. The path opens *as* we walk on it, following Jesus day by day in faith.

AMEN

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