

Pentecost XII
Proper 13
The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes

There were three mice that died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked them how they liked being in heaven. The mice said that it was Ok, but since they had such short legs, it was hard for them to get around because heaven was so big. So, St. Peter told them that he thought he would be able to help them. After a little while, an angel came to the mice and gave each of them a set of roller skates. Right away the mice put the roller skates on, and they could zip around heaven, really enjoying themselves.

A little later a certain cat died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked the cat how he liked being in heaven. The cat answered by saying, "Oh boy, I so like being in heaven! I'm having a great time and I'm really enjoying myself. And most of all, I love those meals on wheels!"

While that little story seems to have nothing to do with our Gospel today, what made me think of it was that it would seem that the Apostles would have had an easier time of feeding those 5,000 people if Jesus had just given them some roller skates!

However, the main point of the Gospel message is not how the Apostles accomplished that task of feeding 5,000 people; nor is the main point even that Jesus apparently performed a miracle there. No, the main point is that Jesus showed mercy and compassion on the crowd of people who gathered there that day. No doubt He wants us to act the same way...to have compassion and mercy for those who we gather with on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis.

When presented with the problem of 5,000 hungry people the Apostles reacted with anxiety. Whatever would they do? It wasn't like there was a 7-11 down the street where they could pick up a couple of thousand meals in a hurry.

Jesus, however, approached the situation with faith. He looked at what was available and just told the Apostles to pass it out...to everyone. No doubt they must have thought he had fallen on his head and addled his brain since it was apparent that those few loaves and fishes were not going to feed the 12 of them much less anyone else. But they had faith in Jesus and so they humored him by doing as he asked them and started passing out the food until all 5,000 were fed and there was more left over for seconds!

You know, Jesus wasn't really planning on a crowd. He had just learned of the death of his beloved cousin and friend, John the Baptist. He had looked for a quiet place to mourn

and remember his friend but as so often happened; once people saw him crowds gathered and grew. So in compassion for these multitudes, Jesus turns away from his own thoughts and grief and concentrated on others.

It is often amazing to discover than turning outward instead of inward can lift our spirits. Compassion and mercy.

There is a story about a French woman who lived in a small village in France. Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and the needy. After many, many years of kind and selfless service to the little village, the woman died. Since she had no family of her own, the townsfolk planned a beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman who had taken care of them throughout her life.

The Parish Priest, however, pointed out to the people that because the woman was not a Catholic she could not be buried in the town's only cemetery, which was a Catholic cemetery. The villagers protested but the priest held firm, which was difficult for him because the woman had cared for him during a long and serious illness. But the canons of the church were very clear, she would have to be buried outside the fence of the cemetery.

The day of the funeral arrived. The whole village turned out for the service and afterwards they carried her body to the cemetery and she was buried...outside the fence. But that

night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the cemetery. They then quietly set to work...moving the fence!! Compassion and mercy!

Not only did Jesus feed the 5,000 but in doing so he formed that crowd into community...a community that united in their need for each other, in the bread they shared and in the love of Christ that brought them together. Christ empowers each of us to form our own miracles of creating community when we "move our fences" whether they be actual fences or the fences in our minds to include outsiders, to welcome the rejected and to love the unlovable. Compassion and mercy!

We often think of this miracle as the "multiplication" of the bread and fish to feed the crowd. However, more accurately, it is a miracle of the "division" of the bread and fish to feed the crowd. You see, multiplying the loaves suggests a change in quantity. However, dividing the loaves suggests a change in quality. Jesus makes due with what is at hand. He blessed it, broke it. Touched by the power of God, it is these specific loaves which are now able to feed the multitude.

Jesus doesn't need to clone more loaves. Instead, in breaking open the bread he brings forth, as no one else could, the possibilities and capabilities hidden in the depths of what is already there.

You know, He does the same with us as well. He breaks us open so that we have the capacity to be, and to do, far more than we otherwise could. He transforms us by making us more fully ourselves, by revealing that identity of which we ourselves are not fully aware. That unique, unduplicated way in which each of us is called to the image of God.

God and I had intimate conversations when I felt that He was calling me to ordained ministry. He said, "Come, I need you." I said "Lord, I'm old, I work full time in a very demanding job and I am tired." He said, "Come, I want you." I said, "Lord it takes 3 years of study and the school is in Fresno and I haven't got time to study and I'm tired." He said, "Come, I want you." I said "Lord, surely you have me mixed up with someone else because I can't do this and I'm tired." He said "I'm getting tired of your excuses...just come." So I went.

If anyone had asked me 5 years ago if I thought that I might be standing here at St. Mark's holding a Morning Prayer service and preaching the Gospel, I probably would have been rolling on the ground hysterically laughing for days! But God blessed me and broke me and with His compassion and mercy he helped me to find within my broken pieces that capacity to do all the things I said I could not do.

No doubt many of you have similar stories you could share. Things that you are able to do that you would never have imagined possible. As with the bread, God blesses us, breaks us and opens up our potential to be more like Him!

There are those who say that miracles like the one performed by Jesus in feeding the 5,000 don't happen today. If they are referring to anyone else being able to feed 5,000 people with just a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish then I guess they are correct. That particular miracle only belongs to Jesus. And Scripture tells us he did it twice!

However, miracles still happen today...every day...and they have as much power in them as the feeding of the 5,000...and they happen to ordinary people and are performed by ordinary people. They might not always seem like miracles to us but that doesn't make them any less miraculous. For me, standing here in front of you today is a miracle. If I had the time to share with you who I was and where I was when God found me the first time and blessed me and broke me, you would agree it was a miracle too!

My only child, my daughter, Jenny, died on her first birthday which was also my 29th birthday. She was a miracle in my life even though it was for a very short time. But then on my 59th birthday my granddaughter, Karly Marie Johnson was

born...another miracle...which has brought incredible joy to my life. Compassion and mercy.

A life is changed and someone gives their heart to Christ...a miracle.

Compassion and mercy.

Each life in this room is a miracle. Those of you who have been faithful to God and His church through thick and thin...and I know that especially lately there has been a lot more thin than thick...that's another miracle. Compassion and mercy.

Like the loaves in the basket, Christ is waiting patiently with compassion and mercy to bless us and to break us open to all the miracles we hold inside.