

Picnicking with Jesus
Matt. 14:13-21
July 7, 2019
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

I went to a picnic recently at the home of one of my Temple colleagues. I talked with the host as he grilled first salmon, then chicken, then hamburgers and then hot dogs! In between some of these proteins he grilled skewers of vegetables and then lastly, corn on the cob! Impressed and surprised at the amount of food he was cooking for the 20-25 folks who were there, who also brought things like appetizers, salads and desserts, I said, "This is a lot of food!" "I know," he replied, "but we had a party once and we ran out of food! So now we cook too much, just to be on the safe side."

I am thinking this couple would have shared the disciples' anxiety the day that folks followed Jesus and lingered long enough to begin to get hungry. You know how that goes-- you go out for the morning and expect to be home by lunch but then you aren't, and your stomach starts to rumble. So, what do you do? You might grab a snack you have stashed in the car or in your purse, or you might pull into McDonald's or the grocery store. Of course, for the folks in the biblical story, fast food wasn't an option. It's interesting to me that the *people* gathered apparently weren't complaining about being hungry, just the disciples. And so, they interrupt Jesus to say, "Hey Teacher, it's been a long day; let's call it quits! It's time to send folks home so they can get something to eat!"

Jesus' reply is simple: "They don't need to go anywhere; **you** give them something to eat."

Now I am fairly confident in assuming that you know this story; but have you thought about what might it be saying to us in our particular context today? This story is told in all four of the

Gospels; it's the only miracle that is! Whether there were 5,000 or 4,000, a small child who had the food or the disciples themselves, it doesn't really matter. What matters is *what* we understand to be the miracle here and how this story invites us all to discipleship.

You see the disciples saw the problem of their *own* hunger, and then *assumed* that other people must be hungry too and all of a sudden, they had a *big* problem. People needed to eat! No Wawa or McDonald's or pizza to send out for. The disciples didn't have the financial resources to feed this kind of crowd, even if there was food nearby, and even if they could figure out how to get it there! It was a financial, logistical, biological nightmare! But this was a problem with a *logical* solution, or so they thought: send people home. It seemed pretty obvious to them.

Sometimes, things do look pretty cut and dried, as we say. We identify something or in some cases, *someone* as "the problem". There seems to be an obvious solution; so, we move in the direction that is most readily available. Makes sense; seems the easiest. But Jesus, in touch with God's Spirit, sees this not as a problem but an *opportunity* for discipleship. It's a possibility! "You do it!" he says. In essence he is asking them, "What have you got? What are your resources?"

Of course, when the disciples report back "five loaves and two fish" they are sure Jesus is going to "cave"; "Ah, you are right," they expect him to say. "That's nowhere near enough; better call it a day!" But, he doesn't. Again, this isn't a problem in Jesus' estimation, but an opportunity. So, he tells them what to do next.

Ever been in a large group? Perhaps you went to see some fireworks this weekend. It's an anonymous experience. Oh, you might chat politely to the folks around you for a minute but

most of us keep to ourselves; we are just another face in a sea of faces, all blending together, moving together, knocking into one another. In large crowds we tend to try our best to preserve our personal space, holding our wallets and purses and backpacks close. Jesus tells the disciples to tell the people to sit down, in some Gospels it specifically says, "in small groups." And, what happens next?

Well, one of the things that happens is that when you take a large group and make smaller groups out of it, people begin to actually *interact* each other. We introduce ourselves to one another. We begin to laugh at how crazy this is, how amazing and strange this Jesus guy is; we talk about where we come from and how quickly the day has fled! When we are in smaller groups, we begin to see one another; we begin to look each other in the eye and when we do that we are reminded of our humanity, of our commonalty. Jesus and the disciples transformed this huge, anonymous crowd into community when they invited them to sit together, to see and to know each other as persons, sisters and brothers, neighbors and partners in God's Spirit. Then Jesus blessed the resources and told the disciples to pass them out. And they did.

Last Wednesday Dennis Landon and I walked a couple of blocks here in Pottstown. We went with the intention of being open, of learning and seeing things we had not seen before. We walked up Charlotte and turned right onto Chestnut. We walked on Chestnut to about Washington and then up to Walnut and started back. We took a turn and went up to Beech Street so we could walk by Art Fusion and then back down Charlotte to the church. We had assumptions about our neighborhood: about the housing, about the people, about what we would find there. We found old housing stock which for the most part, is well maintained, and nearly completely occupied. We found two community gardens, one vegetable and one fruit,

beautifully designed, cultivated and cared for, and had a conversation with one of the caretakers. We saw a few small businesses and two other churches. We saw an old school and a firehouse. We saw people of a variety of ethnicities and ages. We saw homes that indicated they had dogs and others that clearly housed small children. We saw resources...natural resources, skills being put to use, creativity and commitment, people possessing ideas, talents and gifts. We could have looked for all that was wrong, the problems. But instead we prayed for openness to see opportunities. And, they are there. They are already there.

So it was at Jesus' impromptu picnic: opportunities for building community and sharing resources that were already there. No doubt when you go off for the day, you go prepared. I went to the Kutztown Folk Festival on Friday (as apparently did a number of you!) and I took my raincoat and an umbrella and a water bottle, because given the recent weather patterns, it seemed like a prudent thing. These folks in the biblical text were likely no different. They knew they would be gone most the day and they knew there would be no place to eat. And so many of them, if they had the resource to begin with, likely had some bread or cheese or fish in their bag, in their pocket.

I had long been taught that the miracle in this story was whatever happened when Jesus blessed the bread and the fish; that somehow that made them *more*. But I have since come to believe that the real miracle here is that when infused by God's Holy Spirit, *people* began to see each other as community, gift, companion, friend. The *miracle* is that, when centered in God's presence, challenges can be seen as *opportunities*, not problems to be confronted and solved. The *miracle* is that when we make the conscious effort to live our lives like Jesus, looking for the best, the gifts, the blessings, the possibility in people, we discover the abundance of resources

that are already here in our midst! When the crowd sat down and began to see each other, when the disciples modeled sharing their resources, then everyone else did too! I think that out of their pockets and sacks came bits of bread and cheese and fish and that folks began to share, to take, to receive and out of their abundance there were baskets of food leftover when folks had had their fill! What's miraculous is not something that Jesus did, never to be replicated again, but what's miraculous is how compassion and generosity and community modeled by Jesus and the disciples *can* be replicated by us over and over again! What's miraculous is how a problem can become an opportunity when it is infused with the Holy Spirit! What's miraculous is how scarcity can become abundance if we see thru the eyes of Christ.

I don't think the miracle here is that the bread changed; I think the miracle was that the *people changed*. In the spirit of Jesus, they begin to see themselves as sisters and brothers, not as "crowd" but *as community*. We can deepen our community by praying for one another, by being intentional in getting to know each other, really well. In the spirit of Jesus, problems become possibilities. Our building, our neighborhood, our community already has resources that can be shared and in it *we* can be a resource for sharing the good news of God's inclusive, restorative, transforming love. In the spirit of Jesus, what we see as a deficit can become a possibility if we are open to the movement of God's Spirit in our midst, if we are ready and willing to be changed.

Because Jesus evoked the power and presence of God in their midst, people changed. They fed each other the bread of life and doing so, became communion, the body of Christ together. As we share the opportunity to discover the resources of our community, as we pray for one

another, as we break bread and share the cup, let us deepen our sense of becoming communion, with each other and this neighborhood, together, the living body of Christ.