

## Sermon Proper 12 B

St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain

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A few months ago I was sitting on the mountain that has traditionally been seen as the site of today's gospel story. Scholars dispute which hill it was since there are lots of hills and mountains in the Galilee, but from the earliest centuries pilgrims have revered this hill on the north west shore of the Sea of Galilee as the scene of today's story and of the teaching of the Beatitudes, hence its name, the Mount of the Beatitudes.

On the crest of the hill- it's really a hill not a mountain- there is now a Church of the Beatitudes. And as you walk down the slope you can see the sparkling blue waters of the Sea of Galilee stretched out before you. There is a small grotto along the path where many pilgrims believe that Jesus sat to teach his disciples. The whole scene, complete with wildflowers and a gentle breeze and the vista of the Lake and the Golan Heights in the distance, was so beautiful that it was almost painful for me to take it in. I like to imagine that the beauty I saw last March was very similar to what Jesus saw 2000 years ago when this gospel story occurred.

We are told that it was near Passover. So, everyone who listened to Jesus on this hillside would have the themes of the Exodus running through their heads, the story of Moses leading the people out of slavery into freedom. They were seated on a mountain, just as Moses was on the Mount of Sinai when he encountered God. Deuteronomy has a promise of a prophet to follow Moses. There was a tradition of expecting a prophet-king who would come after Moses and would lead the people. And, in today's story the crowd tries to make Jesus that prophet-king. God fed the people with manna in the wilderness as they passed through the Sinai desert on their way to the Promised Land. God parted the Red Sea so that the people could walk safely through the waters. And in today's gospel Jesus walks on the water and then suddenly the boat with the disciples arrives safely at the shore. So, even though we may hear today's gospel as a straightforward account of what happened on a hillside 2000 years ago, those who were there realized that events from at least 1200 years before that were part of the present moment. They would have known the background, all the layers of meaning and the thickness of the experience, enfolding so many Exodus themes into one event on the day Jesus sat down on this hillside with a hungry crowd.

So here they all are. And they are hungry. Our scriptures tell us that there were about 5000. Now, since they only counted men- that's a story for another day- the actual number would have been much higher. The disciples locate a boy with barley loaves and 2 fish. Barley loaves were food for the poor. They were less expensive than regular wheat bread. And, Jesus, like Elisha, in today's first reading, used barley loaves to feed the people. Ordinarily one person would eat 3 loaves as a meal. So, we are going to need a lot of loaves for this crowd!

Jesus takes what is offered by the boy and creates an abundant feast. They were all satisfied. And there was a surplus. Baskets left over from this extravagant meal. So, what actually happened on that hillside that day? Is this a straightforward miracle story? Jesus has compassion on the crowd because they are hungry and he feeds them. I know that Jesus actually fed the people that day. But I think that there was another miracle, too. Maybe Jesus' miracle prompted people who were hoarding a little food for themselves to share it with their neighbors. Maybe Jesus' second miracle here was to not only provide food for the people but also change people from hoarders to sharers, from a heart constricted by scarcity to a heart opened by abundance and generosity. In any event, there was food enough and more left over.

In John's gospel there is no story of the Last Supper meal with bread and wine. We find the feeding story here in John's gospel. Jesus took bread, said the blessing, "Blessed are you, O Lord, King of the universe, who bring forth bread from the earth." and distributed it. Jesus is the host at the table. Except in this story there is no table. Just a beautiful hillside on a lovely day in the Galilee with people who are starving for what Jesus can provide.

Today at the foot of the hill is the settlement of Tabgha and a Benedictine church. This place has been venerated by Christians for centuries as the site of the feeding of the multitude. Because, although Jesus was on the hillside, the crowd would have spilled down from him all the way to the shores of the lake. Today it is a walk of about 10 minutes from the hillside to the water. Now you cross a 2 lane highway to get to the water but it would have been all grass for the crowd and although a little rocky, generally comfortable. As you enter the stunning Benedictine church you find ancient mosaics on the floor. And at the foot of the altar is a mosaic depicting a bowl with 4 loaves and 2 fish. Wait a minute. Four loaves? Where is the fifth? Did the artist not know the story? You can probably figure out this puzzle. The fifth loaf is on the altar. It is the communion bread. And again Jesus is the host, presiding at the table.

Today's gospel story has been seen since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to have Eucharistic themes. The Greek word used for blessing is the derivation of our word for Eucharist. Jesus presides at the table and feeds us with word and sacrament. And grace. He supplies our needs. He can take what little we offer and create a surplus! And all of us who have a ministry of feeding people, especially Angel Food ministries at our parish, and of extending to others the food they need, share in this action of Jesus.

I think as the wine and bread are brought forward at our Eucharist each Sunday of what God will do with our small offerings, our little dish of bread, our small cruet of wine. Extravagant grace. Unfathomable mercy. And food for our journey. Food to take us from Jamaica Plain to heaven! Food for today and the promise of food for eternity at the banquet prepared for us.

As we come forward today to gather around the altar and share the meal that Jesus offers to us, let us remember our brothers and sisters 2000 years ago gathered with him on a hillside on a beautiful day to be fed by him, to be nourished by his teachings and his miracles and let us commit ourselves to seek this bread always, to hunger for Jesus and his ministry all our lives, until the day God calls us by our name and invites us to the meal that will never come to an end.

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.