

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 55:1-5
Psalm 145:8-9, 15-22
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

In recent weeks, we've been hearing some of the most familiar of Jesus' parables:

- the parable of a sower of who sows seeds on every kind of soil;
- the parable of weeds growing up along with good wheat;
- the parable of a tiny mustard seed that grows into a home for the birds of the air;
- the parable of a woman baking bread;
- the parable of a treasure hidden in a field;
- the parable of a merchant discovering a pearl of great value;
- the parable of a net full of fish of all kinds.

Nobody expect us to take these stories literally.

Jesus made them up to teach us about what he called the "Kingdom of Heaven." That's how he so often begins: "The kingdom is like ...". They're not about farming or baking or fishing; they're about LIFE in all its fullness, LIFE for all God's children.

But today, we turn from the parables of Jesus to a miracle. And we probably assume a miracle is a very different thing from a parable. Maybe a miracle story is simply an account of what happened one day, just the facts and nothing but the facts.

But what if, as John Dominic Crossan (among others) has suggested, miracles are really just "parables in disguise"? And if that's the point of a miracle story, then maybe the point of the miracle story we heard this morning is for us hear something about God's dream for how life should be for us. Maybe the point is that Jesus is showing us life as God intends.

All four of the gospels tell us some version of Jesus feeding a large crowd. Matthew and Mark like the story so much, they tell it twice (with slight variations). As much as the gospel-writers love to tell this story, there must be something that still feeds us.

As Matthew tells it this morning, Jesus has gone off to be by himself. And then the crowds find out about him and they come out to him.

But we don't hear why Jesus went off to be by himself that day. And because we don't hear that, I think we likely imagine that everyone went out that day simply because Jesus was in the neighborhood and they all wanted to be near him.

And that's well and good, as far as it goes, but there's more going on. You see, just before Jesus heads off to be by himself, Matthew tells us a story about Herod. Herod, the local king, had (for some time) been holding John the Baptist in prison. John had accused Herod of adultery with Herodias, the wife of his own brother. And the king was displeased. He wanted to kill John, but we're told that he feared the reaction of the crowds, so he kept him locked away.

Until one day, when Herod throws himself a party to celebrate his birthday. He invited his rich and powerful friends. They enjoyed fine food, no doubt. And they enjoyed the spectacle of his step-daughter, the daughter of Herodias, dancing. Herod enjoyed it so much that he (on a whim, it seems) told her she could have whatever she wanted. She asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, and she got it. (Matthew says that Herod didn't want to give in to her demand, but he felt bound by his promise to her. He could not afford to lose face amongst his guests. He feared losing their respect, it seems, more than he feared the crowds.)

And John's disciples come and tell Jesus this horrific story – this terrifying tale – just before the first verse of this morning's gospel, which really reads a little differently than what was printed in our bulletins:

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

The way I hear it, it's as if they're all in shock – both Jesus and the crowds.

Jesus wants time to grieve, to reassess his options perhaps, to think, to ponder, to pray.

"But when the crowds heard it," what they heard was the same shocking story (not merely a rumor that Jesus was in the area). And when they heard that terrifying tale, they head out to follow Jesus. I think they come out that day not just because they've heard Jesus is in the neighborhood, but because they hope he'll tell them what it all means and what to do next.

And Jesus sees them. And Jesus has compassion for them. He cures the sick. And feeds them.

His feeding of the multitudes stands in stark contrast to Herod's party for a select few. Herod's party is exclusive, a private affair for the rich and the powerful. Jesus' feast is inclusive of everyone, a community picnic for men and women and children, for the poor and lost looking for answers and hope. Herod's affair, against a backdrop of fear, ends in death. Jesus offers food for all. And life.

If the miracle seems to be a description of the magical multiplication of bread and fish, it matters little for me here today. But if it's a "parable in disguise," then it's really trying to tell us something about life as God intends it. The "miracle" invites us to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, to see that there is enough to go around for one and for all.

The point (so it seems to me) is to invite us to choose what kind of world we want to live in, to challenge us to dare to imagine we have a choice between a world where Herod is king and a world where compassion and love reign instead.

After all, the feast need never have happened. Jesus could have sent the crowds on their way, each person or family responsible for finding their next meal on their own – and then finding their own way home. In point of fact, that's precisely what the disciples ask him to do.

But Jesus rejects that option in favor of a feast. And what a feast it must have been. Nothing fancy, mind you, but enough for one and enough for all – all "five thousand men, besides women and children." Enough for one and enough for all. With plenty left over.

Especially on the heels of Herod's feast of horrors, it's revelatory.

Herod, as king, is very comfortable with a world of privilege for some and poverty for most everyone else. Herod, as king, establishes a world order in which death is ultimately the inevitable end of a night of self-serving entertainments.

But Jesus presides over a feast where folk come from the highways and byways, where all stripes and types of folk are drawn together, where, according to the vision of the old prophets (and in the words of Michael Curry), "we learn how to lay down our swords and shields ... and study war no more, where we do not hurt and harm [on] God's holy mountain." ⁱ

The disciples asked Jesus to send folks off to fend for themselves, but Jesus wants to hold this beloved community together for a while longer, to give them – and us – a glimpse of the kingdom of God. And that's why it all sounds like a parable to me – one that says that life, as God intends it, is more than a "dog-eat-dog" world in which we're all just looking out for ourselves. Life is supposed to be lived with people looking out for one another.

So notice, too, that Jesus is not the one who offers food. When the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away, he tells them, "YOU give them something to eat."

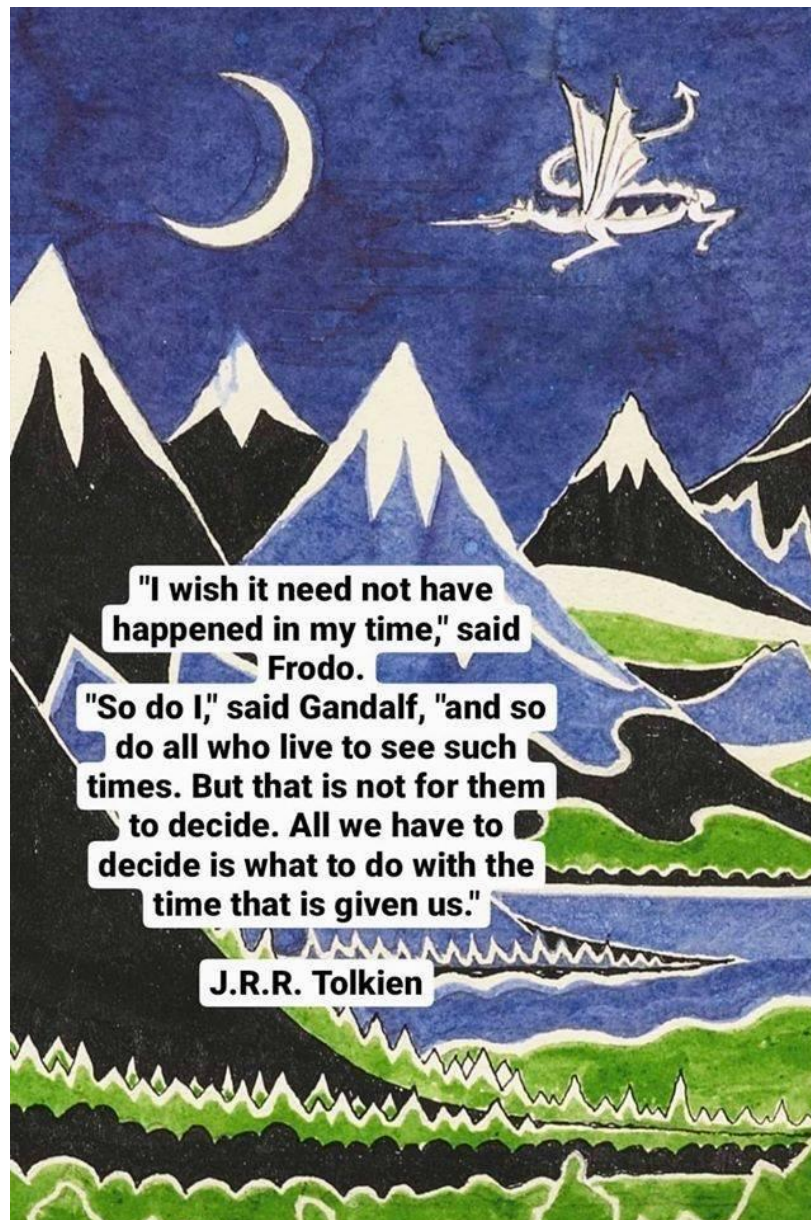
And that may, so far as I'm concerned, be the most important of all the details for us to notice. The disciples respond, of course, saying they don't have enough. "We have nothing here ..." that's precisely how they begin. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Five loaves and two fish might be just enough for supper for the twelve of them. But hardly enough for more – let alone enough for "five thousand men, besides women and children."

And yet Jesus tells them to bring what they have – even if it seems to them not nearly enough to possibly make any kind of a difference – and Jesus blesses it and gives it back to them to share with the hungry crowds. And I remind you: it was enough; and it was more than enough.

The miracle calls us not to dwell on what we don't have, but to put to use what we *do* have for the sake of the “kingdom of God” to take our part in creating that beloved community of Jesus.

Earlier this year, I came across one of those memes that seemed timely back in March. It features a snippet of a conversation between Gandalf and Frodo from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*:



Back in March, the dialogue seemed timely and emboldening. And I suppose it was. It seemed (back then) to speak to me of needing to step up to challenges I did not ask for but could not shirk: to learn how hold meetings on Zoom and stream liturgies on Facebook and YouTube.

But the words seem even more timely now.

Our job, as people of faith, as followers of Jesus, goes beyond merely holding things together until we can get things back to normal again. Because it is becoming increasingly clear (to many of us, I think) that going back to the old normal isn't good enough. The old normal – for too many – looks too much like the kind of world where Herod presides as king. Our calling is to imagine, with Jesus, a new normal, rooted in love and compassion, in which there is enough for one and for all. And it falls on us – to you and to me – to serve at that feast.

Civil rights leader John Lewis was laid to rest this past week. Barack Obama was among those who offered eulogies, extolling his extraordinary life and accomplishments. He also said this:

... as exceptional as John was, here's the thing: John never believed that what he did was more than any citizen of this country can do ... And despite his storied, remarkable career, he treated everyone with kindness and respect because it was innate to him – this idea that any of us can do what he did if we are willing to persevere.

He believed that in all of us there exists the capacity for great courage, that in all of us there is a longing to do what's right, that in all of us there is a willingness to love all people, and to extend to them their God-given rights to dignity and respect. So many of us lose that sense. It's taught out of us. We start feeling as if, in fact, that we can't afford to extend kindness or decency to other people. That we're better off if we are above other people and looking down on them, and so often that's encouraged in our culture. But John always saw the best in us. And he never gave up, and never stopped speaking out because he saw the best in us. ⁱⁱ

It lies within us – within each of us – to choose the kind of world we want to live in. And we don't get to abdicate that choice, asking Jesus to do what he insists is ours to do. We don't get to hide behind the lie that we don't have anything to offer. We have something to offer, even if it seems small compared with the enormous need.

“YOU give them something to eat!”

ⁱ Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/sermon-from-the-presiding-bishop-to-the-house-of-bishops-july-28-2020/>.

ⁱⁱ Barack Obama @ <https://www.ajc.com/john-lewis/read-barack-obamas-eulogy-of-rep-john-lewis/HLQCS4HLSBHEFAHXRTV6YDNQNA/>.