

THE GIVING CHRISTIAN
Year A – Proper 13 – July 31, 2005
The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's readings provide us with two very powerful passages of Holy Scripture. The first is from Paul's letter to the Romans. The second is Matthew's account of the miracle of the feeding of 5,000. Both passages together help us to understand what it means to be a Christian today and point us towards a way of living out our faith.

First, let's talk about Paul's letter. It is his introduction to the Church in Rome. Paul's letter to the Romans is his way of telling them who he is and what he believes. Paul has already been on three missionary journeys. He has established many churches, but this time it is different. Paul wants the Christians in Rome to know who he is as he prepares for his fourth journey. Paul intends to stop at Rome and then move on to Gaul with the message of Jesus Christ.

This is Paul's last letter. It sums up his theology and experience. All what Paul has lived and believed is contained here. But the most powerful thing is Paul's statement about love. He says nothing; absolutely NOTHING can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. Nothing ... not our sins, our ignoring God, our worship of idols ... nothing will keep us from God. Nothing ... not any natural power or any cosmic power can keep us from God. Our God is a God that loves us and will not be kept from us!

This is GOOD NEWS! What reassurance we have in God's love. Think about it. Nothing can keep us from the love of God! NOTHING! This grounding provides us the support to be the Church, to be Christians in any age, at any time with the confidence that if God is for us, who can be against us? Elsewhere in Paul's writings, he talks about love in his first letter to the Corinthians. There Paul talks about this love of God in Christ ... it is patient, it is kind, it is not boastful, it doesn't seek its own way, it seeks out the other. Now we have an understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The implication is clear. We have the love of God behind us. The next time we are confronted with some hurt, some suffering, some pain ...takes heart! Remember that God's love is there with us!

Now let's turn to Matthew's account of the feeding miracle. This is one of the most important miracles in our bible. It is the only one that appears in all four Gospels. However, Matthew has included some important and subtle additions that are vital to us. It is these that I want to focus on this morning. But first, let me remind us that when we have a passage of Scripture it is set in the context of a larger story. I would encourage you to read before the passage and after to get a sense of the larger meaning.

What is the setting of the story this morning? If we read Matthew, we see that two things have happened to Jesus before he gets to this point. First, Jesus went home. When we go home, we expect to be met with support from people who know us and love us. Jesus goes home, he attends the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus talks about God's healing for the sick, liberation for the oppressed and more coming ... and that it is fulfilled in their hearing by him today. We would expect that Jesus' hometown would greet him with joy ... but this is not the case. Jesus is nearly stoned to death; he is driven out of his hometown. Jesus is rejected. The people who knew him best rejected him. This is a common theme in the Gospels. Jesus is actually not received well but by a few people we call the disciples. Most folks turn a deaf ear to Jesus.

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The second event that befalls Jesus is the news that John the Baptist has been killed. King Herod has John arrested and then killed. Here is the prophet who announces the coming of the Kingdom of heaven ... and he is slain. You know what, if God asks you to be a prophet, watch out! Prophets don't fare very well. They are thrown down wells, chased out of town and killed. What is it about us that we react so negatively to the word of God messengers?

These two things must have weighed heavily upon Jesus. He seeks a deserted place to be alone. Just think about it. What do you do when you have a bad day? What happens when the boss is on you all day, or the employees don't respond? What about the days the kids are off the wall or the spouse is less than responsive? What about the days the neighbors are harassing you or there are more bills than advertisements in the mail? Don't you just want to get away from it all?

These are the kind of days that we want to go upstairs to our bedrooms, crawl into bed and pull up the covers over our head. Or maybe this is the day to turn on the television and pop open something to drink. All we want to do is get away from it all. I think Jesus was in this kind of place. But when his boat got to the shore, what does Jesus find? It's a crowd! Jesus doesn't say, "Sorry, the office is closed, come back tomorrow." Or "I'm sorry, I can't deal with you right now."

Look at the response Jesus makes. He looks on the crowd and has COMPASSION. Jesus looks and sees their pain and feels deeply for the people. He cares for them and is moved to act to help them. This is the love of God at work again. Jesus is the love of God that responds to us, meets us in our need, and seeks to cure us. Now let's look at what happens next. Here come those worrywarts ... the disciples. They are concerned that Villa Rosa (the local pizza parlor) or the Corner Bistro (the local restaurant) is about to close. We don't have enough food for them Jesus, send them home. We can't deal with this crowd.

Now Matthew slips in the first of two hints of our ministry. Jesus says to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." You do it! You serve them. You give to them. Matthew is pointing us towards what the Church and we are called to be and do. Matthew is writing a manual for how to be the Church with his Gospel. He is facing a people who have been thrown out of the synagogues and Temple. The Romans are increasing their persecution of the Christians. The early Church, somewhere near 100 CE is in trouble. Matthew wants to provide the encouragement to the first Christians.

There is a shift-taking place here. Now it is not just Jesus who is doing all the work, the disciples are involved. The implication is that we are to be part of the ministry. We are to be involved in what Jesus does. Note what happens next, the disciples say all that they have is five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus takes their offering and works a miracle. Seven pieces of food, seven is important ... it's the number that represents the days of creation, completion, wholeness and perfection. Out of the offering of the disciples, Jesus works a miracle. See how people are drawn into ministry. So it is with us today. Jesus asks us to give, then takes what we offer and makes something happen ... a miracle.

Not only does Jesus feed the crowd, he fills them! They are satisfied. Jesus meets people and need and fulfills their needs. This is a God who cares about us. Jesus responds to us. Not only are they

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filled ... there are leftovers! Twelve baskets worth! Twelve is an important number. Matthew draws in the understanding that this number evokes. For us it is the 12 disciples ... for Jesus' audience, it would evoke the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus not only meets the immediate need, but there is enough for the whole people! How's that for a miracle? How's that for the love of God in Christ made known to us.

The other thing to note is that when the people are fed, it is the disciples who administer it. The miracle involves not only Jesus, but also his disciples! The ministry is mutual. Matthew is making it clear that it's not just Jesus at work here, but his followers are well. The implications are clear ... we are to share in this miracle making as well.

This past week, I was reminded of this mutual ministry. Last night, a man came to my door asking for a handout. I have seen him before, but I was out of the Acme certificates I usually give out. I turned him away. After that, I went to read more in preparation for the sermon. I read about Archbishop Desmond Tutu. During his time in South Africa, he was often asked about his belief in God and the solution to apartheid. Why was it, people asked, if your God is so powerful, that God doesn't come down and destroy those wicked people? Desmond would respond in that soft voice of his, "God's waiting for a human partner to work the miracle!" Archbishop Tutu would then make mention of the people God used, like Nelson Mandela. He was too humble to add his own name. God would use Nelson and Desmond and others to work with the offerings of their lives. These people would give of themselves and then the creative power and love of God would take over. It was a mutual ministry.

I felt bad about the man I had turned away. I could have made a difference, with just a little offering. But then, two other people came to mind. There have been two homeless people hanging around the church the past few weeks. One is named Bill and the other Judy. I have let them use the parish house during the heat of the day as refuge. Bill has dropped off his bags at the office while he goes on appointments. It was a small thing, but I didn't want to leave them out in the terrible heat we have experienced.

Yesterday, I was conducting premarital counseling when Bill stopped by. He came in and spoke with me. He had found a place to stay. He thanked me for my help. I felt it was such a small thing ... less than five loaves and two fish, and yet, somehow ... the miracle happened. It's not the big one of feeding 5,000 ... but it was a sense of relief and joy. Maybe God will help me work a miracle with Judy soon.

The implications are clear. We are called to be Christians involved in the work and ministry, in the miracle making of Jesus himself. What it takes is our knowledge that the love of God is always with us ... all of us. What it takes is our making an offering, and letting God do the rest ... but we have to give. What it takes is our willingness to distribute the love of God and meet the need of others with what God works through us.

These passages are about what it means to be a giving church and giving Christians. So how will we respond when Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."?