

July 25, 2021

Pentecost 9

“The world’s going to Hell in a handbasket.” Whether it’s said as a complaint or an objective observation or both depends on the context, but I’ll bet you I’m not the only one in this room who’s had that thought over these last couple of years of pandemic, lockdown, racial conflict, political warfare, the list goes on. Underlying that thought is a sense of helplessness, of events spinning out of our control. The forces of disorder and chaos are just too great. I’m just one small person. What can I do about events that seem so overwhelming?

Let’s hold that question for a moment as we turn to the Gospel of John’s telling of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. The story is so familiar to us because some version of the story is told in all four Gospels. In fact, it’s the only one of the miracles stories of Jesus that’s told in all four Gospels, so it must be very important.

First, let’s remember that in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ miracles are never called miracles. They are signs. Signs of the way God works in the world. There are seven and the Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of them, so let’s take a look.

A large crowd has gathered because they’ve seen the signs that Jesus was doing for the sick. Jesus is a healer, meaning God is a healer. Now, Jesus’ friends are concerned because the crowd is so large and there’s not enough food to feed them all. But, lo and behold, they’ve found a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish – it’s his lunch! – and apparently he’s willing to share his lunch with this huge crowd. So Jesus takes the loaves and fish, says a blessing over them, and distributes them himself to the big crowd. And there was so much left over it filled twelve baskets! “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world.’”

What was the sign, you ask? Pretty straight forward. People were hungry. They needed to be fed. People had real, physical needs. They came to God in faith and God responded. And Jesus gives the gift of himself, his presence, in the bread. There’s such intimacy here. God in Christ as close to us as our growling stomachs. God in Christ filling our needs for nourishment, filling our needs for connection, filling our needs for relationship.

Now that leads us to notice a couple of differences between the way John tells the story and the way Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story. In their version, there are these hungry people and the disciples bring that to Jesus’ attention and Jesus turns to them and says, “YOU give them something to eat.” The disciples go away from the crowd and collect five loaves and two fish. We don’t know from whom. Jesus then blesses, breaks, and the disciples feed. It’s overtly Eucharistic. In John’s version, on the other hand, it’s a little boy who offers up his lunch. And it’s Jesus, himself, not the disciples, who feeds the crowd. Jesus himself is the Bread of Life.

I loved this story when I was a little boy. I always imagined what it would be like to walk up to Jesus and offer him everything I had. That’s really the beauty of this story, isn’t it? One person, one *little* person at that, offers all that he has, and it makes a difference.

So let's get cack to the question I posed a few minutes ago. When it looks like things are going to hell in a handbasket, what can I do about it? I'm just one small person after all, and I feel powerless. Well, maybe not. I got an email a couple of days ago from one of our young folks here at St. Thomas, who's in college now. Nelson Ngouenet served us as an acolyte and a lector – and a darned good one – before he left us for college in Philadelphia. Here's what he wrote:

“Hello Father Lex,

I hope that you are doing well! I recently conducted a clothing drive in my apartment building at UPenn and now have hundreds of items of clothing to donate. I am looking for places in Philadelphia or NYC to partner with to either donate the clothes to or to set up free clothing stores for local community members to benefit from. Do you have any recommendations as to churches or organizations that I can reach out to?”

Why, yes I do, Nelson. I've put him in touch with the Episcopal Cathedral of Philadelphia, which is located right in his neighborhood. If they can't help him, we'll go to Plan B. You see what's going on here? Nelson is taking the little bit that he has and offering it up to God to serve God's people. To meet real human needs. Food. Clothing. Shelter. Real human needs. Just like you are doing this month with CFH. The human need for decent shelter. The human need to be fed. The human need to be recognized as a person of dignity and worth.

When it seems like it's all going to hell in a handbasket, one response is to take the little bit that we have and offer it up to God. Place your little bit in Jesus hands and let it become the Bread of Life. And when it seems like it's all going to Hell in a handbasket, don't look down. Look up. Look up and you might just see Jesus walking towards you, walking on the water, like the disciples in the boat – you might be terrified, but if you'll just listen, you just might hear Jesus say, “It is I; do not be afraid.” When everything is going to Hell in a handbasket, look up, listen up, offer up. And do not be afraid! The Apostle Paul reminded the little group of Christians in Ephesus that there was a power at work in them that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all they can ask or imagine.

But it's not for us to try to control. When the crowd saw the sign of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, they wanted to take Jesus away and make him their King. They wanted to use Jesus to satisfy their own idea of what he should be doing in the world. And Jesus withdrew. Actually, the better translation there is Jesus *fled*.

You know what? I'll bet that little boy wasn't in the crowd that thought it was a good idea to make Jesus their king. I'll bet that little boy had a different idea. He'd seen the problem. Folks were hungry. He looked up. Don't be afraid, he heard in his heart. He listened up. And that moved him to offer up – all that he had. And then what happened? He came into Jesus' presence. The Real Presence, the Real Presence we experience here in the Eucharist. He came into the presence of God. He became part of the solution.

So when it feels like this weary old world is going to Hell in a handbasket, you don't need a king to magically rescue you. There's real human need out there. *You* be part of the solution. Look up. Listen up. Offer up. Come into Jesus' Real Presence. And above all, do not be afraid.

