

August 3, 2014, Matthew 14:13-21
Irving Park Lutheran Church, Pastor Erin Bouman

You Do It

The structure of today's gospel is the structure of worship, is the structure of grace.

Notice the structure of the gospel story: A crowd gathers around Jesus, receives healing, next is food. Notice how that structure mirrors what we do every Sunday. A crowd gathers around Jesus, the word of God; we receive healing, forgiveness; we get ready for food, holy communion.

But then, in the gospel story, there's a snag, a question by the disciples: Can we feed this crowd? Can we do this?

I think we encounter that same snag, that same question, in church, about church.

Notice how the disciples' question has reasons. They say to Jesus, "We're in an out of the way place. It's late."

They seem like pretty good reasons, don't they? They sound like reasons disciples still give, today, for not being able to do this, to be church—reasons of place and time. I hear things like this, sometimes, talking with church people about worship and ministry. I hear things like, "Well, I don't know if churches in the city can make it any more these days. People are just so busy, so transitory." Or, "Well, I don't know if churches in the country can make it any more these days, those rural town are all disappearing." Or, "Well, I don't know if churches in the suburbs can make it any more these days, unless they're a mega church, and I don't know if megachurches can make it any more these days, that model has run its course."

Well, all of those sound like valid reasons, real challenges to ministry, but Jesus isn't interested in them. Notice how Jesus doesn't even respond to those reasons the disciples give, those reasons of place and time. Which is not to say that Jesus isn't aware of them. I think Jesus knows better than anyone about challenges to ministry then, and now. And what does he say?

Jesus says, "This is a good place to eat. This is a good time to eat."

Jesus says, "Let's have church. Here. Now."

Jesus says, "You do it."

You do it... My sister has a two year old—what an active and headstrong age that is! There's so much they want to do—and they want to do it themselves. One evening, when the hour was now late, my sister started gathering and packing up toys and the travel bag, she tried hurrying things along by helping her daughter put on her shoes. Her daughter threw a tantrum. She wanted to do it! As children age, that can change. Instead of being upset at being helped, sometimes children sometimes say they need help for things you would think they could do! It's remarkable, actually, how highly adept elementary-aged children claim to have difficulty with simple tasks: getting themselves a snack, putting their dish in the dishwasher, closing the closet doors...

I can only get away listing these examples because my children are still away on vacation. If they were here, I would catch it for outing them. (You are all sworn to secrecy.) The truth is, though, that I'm not outing them. I'm outing me, the parent. Adults are the ones who teach children what they can and cannot do. Adults are the ones who allow children to operate with a sort of learned helplessness.

I once read a parenting book that talked about this learned helplessness. In one example, the author described a visit to a second grade class room at snack time. Not a single child could pour a glass of juice. No adult had ever let them, ever said to them, “You do it.”

There’s something like that classroom scenario in the gospel today. People have gathered around the teacher, and it’s time for a snack. And then there’s this snag. But Jesus is not interested in our learned helplessness. Nor is Jesus a hovering helper, telling us to hurry. Jesus takes time for us, while teaching us, saying, “You do it.”

This statement that Jesus makes to his followers, his disciples, his students, Jesus’ command, his confidence is unbelievable. We grown-ups, we know what poor students humans are: how we learn war rather than peace, how we hoard resources, rather than share them. We who work with bureaucracies, or in service industries, we know how people can be: careless, slow, messy, rude. We grown-ups who are administrators, or aides, or managers, or mothers, we know the selfishness, the poverty, of the human condition. We know what we are.

Sometimes, like the disciples in the gospel today, we think we have to point that out to God, too: “Look at the hungry crowd, in this godforsaken place, and all we’ve got is a handful of food.” Surely that will convince Jesus that this group of people should not be breaking bread together? Five loaves and two fish?! Surely Jesus will realize how paltry that is?!

Again, this seems like a good reason. Doesn’t it seem a reasonable concern for the church, this lack of resources? We’re still recovering from the recession. We’ve got aging buildings. We need more engaged lay leaders, and more committed congregants, and better pastors... Again, I don’t think Jesus is unaware of the challenge of resources. I think Jesus knows better than anyone just how paltry we are.

Don’t misunderstand me, I identify with the disciples, with their challenges, with their reasonable concerns. Like the disciples, I try to be reasonable—but we worship a God who is not. We who are gathered here today, we disciples, we worship a God who is unreasonably gracious. We worship a God who says, “Bring it here, whatever you have. I am here; and I will not forsake you.”

The gospel is a miracle: thousands fed in a wasteland.

The gospel is a miracle: knowing what we are, God turns to us, and tells us what we can be.

I don’t think it takes a miracle to believe in God. I think it’s a miracle that God believes in us.

God takes what we have, in the most out of the way place, at the most inopportune time, and makes a banquet, creates a feast, produces holy communion in and with and for a poor and hungry crowd. Haven’t we known that miracle, here in this place? Again and again, I’ve heard it said, “Another Irving Park miracle.” Again and again we hear God’s grace being shared, we hear the Eucharist, we hear it in the very structure of the gospel story today, we hear echoed the words of institution: Jesus takes the bread, and blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples...

When the gospel writer John tells his version of this miracle, it’s a child that offers the loaves and fish. It’s a child that has not learned helplessness. It’s a child who wants to be part of God’s miracle. You and I can be that child. Every one of us is a miracle, created to be living sacraments for the world, in communion with thousands who have been fed, and witnesses to what we yet may be.

You do it.