

Proper 12

the Sign of Multiplication and Walking on Water.

First Sunday in Bread of Life Discourse

Jesus Feeds Us with His Own Hands

By the Rev. Salying Wong

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."*

Thus begins the Book of Signs, the first half of the Gospel of John. This prologue tells us what all the signs do--they tell us that the Word became incarnate and came to give us grace upon grace. This is grace never experienced before, not even in the law of Moses, which itself is very gracious. This is grace that is intimate in the person of Jesus; Jesus who is close to the Father's heart is now here to bring us nearer to the heart of God.

This is the meaning of the Sign of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes. Jesus has come to feed us with abundant grace, to draw us to himself. This is love born not of woman or the will of the flesh, but of God.

This week, a friend of mine is keeping vigil with her best friend and business partner for the last 25 years, as she dies from

cancer. At first, she supplied food and friendship. In their healthy days, they'd share their tastiest food. But when she got really sick, she spooned applesauce into her friend's mouth, feeding her like a child. Now, at the end stage, when her dying friend can no longer eat, friendship is the only food. Then the long wait and the agony of love.

This intimate scene looks to me like the multiplication of loaves and fishes. This is the only miracle that happens in all four gospels. But unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, where the disciples feed the crowd; in John, Jesus feeds each person directly. There are 5000 men. How many women and children were there? Another 10-20,000 altogether? The miracle might not just be that the loaves and fishes are multiplied, but that Jesus feeds each person, around 25,000 people--*himself!*

This is the audacity of the Gospel of John and the heart of its claim: For God so loved the whole wide big world, that he sent his son to feed them all by his own hand. Everyone can come close to Jesus. Everyone, as a child or as an adult or as one dying, can feel the intimacy of Jesus putting bread in their mouth.

The Gospel tells us that the place where they are eating has much grass. Jesus leads them to green pastures and beside the still waters and restores their souls. This is the Good Shepherd who knows each of his sheep by name and nourishes each with his own hand.

But the people are sheep and don't understand easily. They can get a little distracted. Unlike today, with our scientific minds, where our distraction might be to focus on the question, "Can miracles really happen?"--the distraction on that day was, "How can I keep eating as much as I want?" They are used to the bread and circuses of the Roman politicians. These politicians

would win their approval by doling out bread and holding games at Circus Maximus and win their favor. Well, this Jesus, he's the best. They've never been so full in their lives! Jesus' ratings skyrocket and they decide that he should be king. Jesus sees that they want him for the pleasure of their stomachs. They have misunderstood the sign. The crowd is distracted by their stomachs and do not notice their hearts being called to open to the one who has come near. They look only at the sign and not where the sign is pointing toward. It is like looking at the moon's radiance and thinking the moon is its own source of light. So, he flees from them.

To help them to understand, Jesus performs another sign and walks on water. As you recall, Jesus flees from the crowd to a lonely place. The disciples get into a boat to get away from the crowd, but Jesus is not with them. In the midst of strong wind, Jesus walks out to them and they freak out because they think he's a ghost. But he says to them, "Be not afraid, I AM."

If you're following the sign, you might gasp at its audacious destination. When you hear this, you automatically think of Yahweh, who says his name is "I AM." Is Jesus claiming that in him God is made flesh? That, if you had eaten the bread, you were fed by God's very hands? And when Jesus performed the multiplication, it was God's offer of abundance to you--not just of food, but of love? That maybe it wasn't really about getting all the food you want, but getting all the God you want, in fact, in abundance. Your cup runneth over. Goodness and mercy are following you, coming for you, walking beside you.

So, in the end, the only food is friendship, and this friendship is eternal, springing from eternity and moving forward forever. The signs written in the Book of Signs are for all who are told the signs. In short, they are for us today. "Blessed are those who

have not seen, and yet believe.” Today, Jesus comes to us to invite us to receive him as the nourishment that lasts. Today, will you feed on him?