

Was It Stone Soup?
A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
John 6:1-21

A few weeks ago we had Bible school at my church. It got me thinking about the Bible, and it got me thinking about children. And when I think about children and the Bible I sometimes think about the boy in today's Gospel lesson from John, chapter 6.

We don't know much about him. "There is a boy here," says Andrew, "who has five loaves and a few small fish." How did he know? Where did he find him?

In Mark's account of the story Jesus tells the disciples to go look among the crowd for food, and my suspicion is that that is how

it happened. The disciples went from one person to another asking, “Do you have any food? Excuse me, do you have any food?”

Can you imagine? Being in that crowd of thousands, having some hungry looking disciple approach you like a beggar, asking for food? Even if you had some, would you give it to him? Probably not. It doesn't surprise me that they didn't come back to Jesus with baskets full of food. It only surprises me that they came back with anything at all. This boy. This one boy with five small loaves and a few fish. As Andrew says with a shrug, what is that among so many?

But Jesus brightens at the news. Here is something, at least, to work with. “Make the people sit down,” he says eagerly, and

then, in my imagination, he squats down at this boy's eye level, and holds out his hands.

Now, this boy was probably no less hungry than anyone else. He might've held on tightly to the little he had. But in an act of radical generosity he handed his lunch over to Jesus. And in an act of radical faith Jesus held up these five small loaves and two fish and said something like, "Thank you father, for providing enough food for all of us to eat." And then he begins to hand them out.

We all know the story. We know that a miracle happened that day. All four of the Gospels agree on this, and on the fact that afterward 12 baskets of scraps were gathered up. There was plenty, Matthew says, and Mark, and Luke, and John. Plenty.

We know it was a miracle. What we don't know is what kind of miracle it was. How did it happen? That much, at least, is left up to our imaginations.

In most of the Jesus movies I have seen it is presented as a miracle of multiplication. Jesus puts the loaves into a basket, raises it over his head, and when he brings it down again the nearly empty basket is brimming over with bread. He does the same with the fish, so that a few small fish become a feast for thousands. A miracle of multiplication, as I said, but we are in the realm of speculation here. Anything is possible. And for the sake of the sermon let's imagine another possibility: Let's imagine that what they had to eat on that day was the Galilean equivalent of stone soup.

Do you know the story? “A young man was walking down the road. He walked all night and he walked all day. He was tired, and he was hungry. He came to a fine house...

[Tell the story]

Is that what happened on that day? Did people begin to draw out from under their coats, out of their knapsacks and from inside their tunics the food that they had brought? Was it only this boy in other words, who had brought a lunch, or was it only this boy who was willing to share? Did his radical act of generosity coupled with Jesus’ radical act of faith inspire another kind of mathematical miracle—a miracle of addition—in which people simply added what they had to what the boy had given until everyone had enough and there were still 12 baskets left over? Like a potluck luncheon in my tradition, where everyone frets

that there won't be enough, so that they each bring more than anyone could possibly eat? Is that what happened on that day?

It's not the traditional take on the story, and while I wouldn't want to suggest for a moment that this is the way it actually happened I would want you to see that this kind of miracle would be no less miraculous than that other kind. And maybe more so. For while the heart of God has always wanted to provide bread for the world the human heart has often cared only to provide bread for itself. It would take a miracle, wouldn't it? For our hoarding hearts, our grasping hands, to release their grip on the little we have and place it into the hands of Jesus?

But it is just the kind of miracle the world needs.

I teach a fifth and sixth grade Sunday school class at my church, and just a few weeks ago we were studying that part of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sew, nor reap, nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not far more valuable than they?” And then someone asked the question every Sunday school teacher dreads: the hard question, the unanswerable question. “Then why do so many people starve to death in the world?” There was a long silence. And then an answer that reminded me of stone soup. One of those wise children said, “It’s not that there isn’t enough food to feed the world; it’s just that some of us won’t share.” We are like that woman in the story who had plenty, but still closed her door and the young man’s face, insisting she had nothing. We are like the crowd of

people on that grassy Galilean hillside, who may have had for lunch bags of their own, but were afraid to share. God, in his goodness, has provided enough for everyone, but God refuses to coerce our behavior. He has made us free. Free to share or free to hoard. We choose to hoard, so that the problem of hunger in the world is no reflection of God's stinginess, but rather a reflection of our sinfulness. What we need is a radical act of generosity to inspire us. What we need is a radical act of faith to empower us. And who knows, a little child may lead us, too.

There was a little child, a girl, who refused to eat broccoli. Every time her mother served it the girl would push it to one side of her plate. And every time she did she heard the same speech: "You should eat your broccoli, Jane. There are children starving in other parts of the world. Children in Africa, for

instance, who would love to have your broccoli.” So, her mother shouldn’t have been too surprised when she got a phone call from the post office one day telling her that she had provided insufficient postage for a heavy, rather greasy shoe box wrapped in brown paper, and addressed in crayon to “The children of Africa.” They found three weeks’ worth of broccoli in there, some of it well past its prime.

But isn’t that the kind of example we may need, where we stop giving lectures and start sending packages? Where we begin what would be an altogether different kind of mathematical miracle, a miracle of division, where we divide up the plenty we have with those in the world who don’t have enough. There are good ways to do that. Most denominations have world hunger offerings. Your own local soup kitchen may need a new stove.

There are charities everywhere that feed the children. But none of that will last until we can follow the example of that boy from John six, who put what he had (and we assume it was all he had) into the hands of Jesus. “Here,” he might have said, “take that and see what you can do with it. Feed the children in Africa.” And “Here,” we might say, “take this and see what you can do with it. Take my fear of not having enough.”

Because that’s the real problem, isn’t it? It is certainly the problem Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount. When he talks about the birds of the air it’s not a problem of food, but a problem of fear that he’s after: “Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat,” he says. “Worry makes you hold on too tight, to too little. Instead, trust God. Believe in his ability to provide. You are children of the Heavenly Father. He longs to give you every good gift.” In a radical act of trust—like the boy

in today's Gospel reading—put your life and not only your lunch into the hands of Jesus...

And see what he can do with it.

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