

Teachin' and Preachin'

I am at odds with myself this morning. The teacher in me wants to take apart this passage while the pastor in me wants to preach about its meaning for us today. Rather than pick one I have decided to give you a little of both.

First, we will have a bit of teaching. I have commented before about how the Bible is in conversation with itself. In particular, how one Bible passage will allude to one or more other passages. This short pericope¹ is loaded with references both obvious and subtle.

In the very first line Jesus withdraws to a deserted place. What does that remind you of? I am reminded of Jesus going into the wilderness right after his baptism. Then it was to sort out his calling, in this case it is to refresh his relationship with God. In both instances he is getting away from the distractions of the world to be in prayer. Yet, unlike his personal sojourn in the wilderness, in this case the crowds follow him. This could remind us of when Moses went into the wilderness and the people followed him on the Exodus. While the people of Moses' time were hungry for freedom from oppression, these people are hungry for the words and miracles of Jesus. They are seeking freedom from the oppression of their souls. They are so hungry they head him off as he tries to escape them for a little peace and quiet. When he finds that they have undone his search he does not send them away but tends to them.

Another image that hearkens to the Exodus is a crowd without food. On the Exodus the people complained so loudly that God gave them manna from heaven, the food of the angels. This crowd seems content they do not cry out, but the disciples seemed burdened by the situation. So much so, that when Jesus asks them what they have their first response is "nothing."² Then they mention two fish and five loaves of bread.

From this point on the imagery comes at us quickly. After Jesus asks the disciples to give him the food, he tells the crowd to sit down on the grass. In this small action we hear echoes of Psalm 23 "he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul."³ Indeed, the crowd which is now sitting in the green grass has followed him all this way because they are experiencing the restoration of their soul.

But the imagery does not stop there, for then Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it. This is a foreshadowing of the Last Supper and of our Eucharist, that holy meal that we miss so much right now. This also foreshadows the heavenly banquet a feast of abundance that does not end. Indeed, the five loaves and two fish feed 5,000 men plus uncounted women and children and twelve baskets (the number of the tribes of Israel) are left over.

One very subtle image that we may overlook is what Jesus does with the food once he has blessed it. He does not hand it to the people directly. Instead he hands it to his disciples. This is a foreshadowing of the Great Commission when he hands off

¹ Fancy theological jargon for passage.

² Matthew 14:17

³ Psalm 23:2-3a King James Version

his ministry to the disciples making them apostles, the ones sent out to teach, preach, and make disciples of all nations.

In just a few verses we have allusions, images, and to the expanse of the Bible from Exodus, to Psalms, to the Gospels and even Revelation.

As interesting and compelling as all of this is, what is the word for us this week? What did I mean when I said there was a pastoral sermon in this? It may have struck you that we are like those people of old who were following Jesus around. We too are following Jesus hoping for a good word, a miracle, and some hope. Even in times before COVID-19 we were wandering in the wilderness. Much of the world decided to place their hope in political schemes, money, diversions from reality whether it be TV, drugs, wanton sex, or alcohol to name a few, or, and this may be the most disappointing of all, perversions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When the preacher is more important than the word he or she preaches, when their sermons revolve around obtaining more possessions and money, or when they dress and live lives as grand as celebrities beware. Chances are they are the false teachers that Jesus warned us about.

People, particularly during this pandemic, are scared. They are finding that the things they put their faith in are fool's gold and the people they put their faith in have clay feet. Some are seeking something more spiritual, but others do not know where to start. We know where it starts and ends. We know the Alpha and Omega if we chose to follow. But it is not enough to be smugly aware that we have the answer. We need to be like Jesus who saw that a little could go a long way, and commissioned his disciples to feed a crowd out of what they had. Jesus knows that we may think we have nothing to offer, just a few metaphorical loaves and fish. Jesus also knows that when we start to share out of our poverty we find abundance. Not just metaphorical abundance, but real abundance of spirit, of life and of love.

At the end of this service Beverly is going to play the hymn "I sing a song of the saints of God." The hymn initially praises the saints of old who were "faithful, brave and true." It names them in their occupations—a doctor, a queen, a shepherdess, a soldier, a priest, and one slain by a strange wild beast. Each verse ends with the assertion "and I mean to be one too." The third verse tells us that the saints of God can be people we meet each day in all walks of life. The hymn ends for "the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too."

The disciples on that grassy hillside did not know the power that was in them. They thought they had "nothing" to offer. I expect that many of us think the same thing and turn to others thinking they have the answer. Let us be resolute in our faith. To quote St. Paul, "If God is for us who can be against us?"⁴ We have the love of God in Christ Jesus. The strength of this love can overcome angels, principalities, the present, the future, any powers, heights, depths, indeed anything in all creation.⁵

So like the psalmist, let "My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD; *let all flesh bless his holy Name for ever and ever." With these words in our mouths and hearts let us go forth to help a world and a nation in need today and every day as long as we have life and breath.

⁴ Romans 8:31

⁵ Romans 8:38-39