

JULY 26TH, 2015: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

II Kings 4:42-44 Ephesians 4:1-6 John 6:1-15

Only one of Jesus' miracles is included in all four gospels: his extraordinary feeding of a huge crowd of people. It's narrated six times! Yet, as Scripture scholars constantly remind us, two (or more) evangelists can include the same passage in their works, yet use it to convey completely different theologies. Though every gospel bread miracle has something to do with the Eucharist, each writer concentrates on a different aspect of it. This is certainly the case with today's gospel pericope.

Up to this point of the "B" lectionary cycle we've been methodically listening to Mark's gospel, appreciating how, passage after passage, he develops his insights about dying and rising with Jesus. Yet just when we reach the point in which he presents his ideas about how we accomplish our dying and rising in the Eucharist – his first bread miracle - we shift from Mark's theology to John's: a biblical "no-no." (What's even sadder is that we'll never – during any weekend liturgy - hear Mark's take on that important miracle.)

Mark focuses on the role of the disciples in feeding the crowd; John zeros in on Jesus. He's the one who first notices the lack of food, and then, on his own, takes care of everyone's hunger. He's totally in control of the situation. After all, from the very beginning "he himself knew what he was going to do."

This is the image of Jesus the fourth evangelist almost always conveys. He usually pushes Jesus' humanity into the background, and displays his divinity front and center. That's why we can't compare Elisha feeding 100 people in today's II Kings pericope with Jesus feeding five thousand. Besides, Elisha depends on Yahweh to pull off the feat, while Jesus – as Yahweh – does it on his own.

Yet perhaps the most important part of John's chapter six narrative is his insistence that this event, like all his miracles, is a "sign." What's implicit in the synoptics is explicit in John. No evangelist employs miracles willy-nilly. Each has a reason why he puts this particular miracle in this particular place. There's always something deeper in such passages than immediately meets the eye.

For John, as for us, a sign is something which leads us to something else. If we don't reach the something else we won't understand what the sign was trying to convey.

The late Anthony de Mello often told the story of the Indian peasant who had a life-long dream of visiting Bombay. When his friends and fellow villagers eventually raised enough money to make such a trip possible, he was overjoyed. Yet he surprised everyone by returning from Bombay much earlier than expected.

When his benefactors asked, "Did you actually see Bombay?" he assured them he had. And when they inquired what Bombay was like, he eagerly responded, "It's green, about two feet long and a foot high, with big yellow letters, B O M B A Y." Obviously, like many readers of the Scriptures, he had confused the sign with the reality beyond the sign.

We can't understand John's theology without understanding John's signs. For instance, in today's passage the "twelve wicker baskets with fragments" can only refer to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. John is convinced that all Jews, like all Christians, could be fed by Jesus if they only permitted themselves to be fed by him.

Of course, to appreciate John's signs we must have the same frame of mind which the Pauline disciple who wrote Ephesians had. We have to commit to "living in a manner worthy of the call we've received." Gospel signs are only for those committed to becoming other Christs. All others will stop at the city limits.

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AUGUST 2ND, 2015: EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 John 6:24-35

Our faith comprises more than just the unique moment in which we make a conscious decision to imitate Jesus' dying and rising. We actually have to carry through on that choice for the rest of our lives.

The disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to the Ephesians certainly understood the day by day consequences of becoming other Christs. "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds," he writes. "That is not how you learned Christ."

Those who are committed to learning Christ are expected to "put away their old selves and former ways of life." Each day they must "be renewed in the spirit of their minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth." Obviously everyone in the author's community accomplished such a turnabout the day they gave themselves over to Christ and were baptized. But how do they follow through on this commitment every day for the rest of their natural lives?

That's where today's gospel comes in.

John's Jesus expects us, among other things, to fall back on the Eucharist. He presumes that to maintain life, we must eat. But when we're talking about the kind of life that helps us "accomplish the works of God," natural food isn't enough. That's why his Jesus returns us to the event narrated in our Exodus passage.

Scripture scholars immediately point out that whenever we surface a "grumbling or griping" narrative in any part of the wandering in the wilderness experience of the recently freed Israelites, it's from the "Yahwistic source." This particular oral tradition was written down – perhaps by a woman! - during the 10th century BCE "glory days" of ancient Israel; most probably while Solomon was on the throne.

Though everything seemed to be going along fine for the majority of Jews during that period, this particular author consistently pointed out that, just below the surface, things weren't as terrific as people imagined. For instance, it's the Yahwistic author who, back in chapter 2 of Genesis, brought up the clothes issue. If we're living in a perfect world – as some of Yahweh's people thought – then why do we wear clothes? Obviously, something's disordered otherwise we'd have no problem going around naked.

In a parallel way, some 10th century Israelites began to idealize their history – especially the Exodus. They presumed all the enslaved Hebrews immediately responded to Yahweh's call to leave Egypt, marched resolutely through two walls of sea water and entered the Sinai wilderness with great faith in God's care and protection. This inspired author saw salvation history from a different perspective. She was convinced that if God's Chosen People for whom she was writing in the 10th century griped and grumbled about Yahweh's care and protection, then their ancestors in the 12th century must have given into the same temptation of mistrust. In other words, there's no ideal history. Our relationships with God and one another have pretty much been the same through the centuries.

Just as the Exodus Israelites needed the manna and quail as signs and helps of Yahweh's protection, so late first century Christians needed the risen Jesus' "true bread from heaven" as a sign and help to achieve the life to which they were committed. Nineteen centuries later, we're still in this faith thing for the long haul. We long for that day when we'll never again hunger or thirst. But, in the meantime, in the midst of our grumbling and griping over the demands of that faith, we'd better take full advantage of the Eucharistic food the risen Jesus offers us right here and now, else we might fall by the wayside.

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