

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

August 3, 2008

Fed by Grace

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 58:6-9; Matthew 14:13-21

The Bible is not a children's book, at least not by today's standards.

In fact, a lot of press has been given lately to the ways in which familiar fables and children's stories have been toned down to protect the so-called tender sensibilities of young minds. Even on television, that venerable children's classic *Sesame Street* has changed a lot over its forty-year history. Last year, when a DVD of some early episodes of the program was released, it came with this warning: "These episodes are intended for grownups and may not be suitable for today's preschool audience." In fact, one producer of the show has been quoted as saying they never could have created a character like Oscar the Grouch in today's environment. Oscar, you see, lives in a trash can, and he is, after all, a grouch. Neither of these things is appropriate for children. I've also heard that Cookie Monster has acquired a taste for vegetables in the current broadcasts.

What are our children learning, or not learning, when we hide from them the fact that not everyone is polite, not everyone is nice, not everyone has good eating habits? How can children learn about facing the larger challenges of life when

those challenges have been censored from the stories they are told? And how can adults learn, if we turn from uncomfortable truths, or fail to protest when such things are edited out of the story line?

These may seem like odd questions to raise as I begin to preach to you about a beloved and powerful miracle story from the gospel of Matthew. The feeding of the 5000 is probably the best known and most-widely reported among the miracles of Jesus' ministry. It was an important story for the early church and continues to be an important story for the church today. It is told by all four of the gospel writers who agree in their accounts on even some of the smallest details of this episode: that there were five loaves and two fish.

However, what is less often told is the ominous event which immediately precedes this story, the very context that forces Jesus to a forlorn and lonely place, pursued by a needy and hungry crowd. One reason that hearers of Scripture often fail to get the larger context is that we preachers tend to concentrate on a few verses or no more than a paragraph from Scripture at a given time. We treat the gospel narratives as if they are made up of a series of discrete episodes, each with its own beginning, middle and ending, seemingly unrelated to the others. In the ancient church, they never had this problem because worship leaders read aloud large sections of Scripture, several chapters at a time, when the people were gathered. We don't do that so much anymore. Today's hearers are not used to

listening to extended readings. And that means we often fail to grasp the greater stream of events which gives meaning to a particular story.

In the case of the feeding of the 5000, it also means that we skip over a brutal and cruel episode that few of us really want to spend time on anyway.

Some of you who have kept your pew Bibles open are already flipping back the page to see what happened before the miraculous feeding. Like the story which follows it, this is also a story about feeding, a feast, a sumptuous, extravagant meal attended by a large number of guests. However, that is the point where the similarities end.

This earlier story describes the birthday party of King Herod. No doubt, that was a much coveted invitation back in the day. No expense would have been spared. Only the leading citizens would have been included. No riff raff in the crowd. Everyone wearing their finest robes, driving in on the fanciest chariots (or something of the sort).

You would expect the guests at such a stellar event to be sorry to be leave with a satisfied stomach and happy memories of an evening spent in the finest company.

But this night, a meal of the richest foods and the most expensive wines was capped off not with dainty sweets tastefully arranged but a bloody human head severed from its body and served up on a platter. A completely disgusting display

of arrogant disregard for human life: John the Baptist, murdered at the behest of a reckless and doddering despot and his conniving and pitiless wife. We hear the details of this story and recoil at such horror.

Jesus heard the details, too, soon after the event, and he had to get away. For him, the assassination of his cousin John was up close and personal. Relatives to one another, the ministries of Jesus and John had progressed on parallel courses. If John had fallen victim to Herod, who would the king come looking for next? Jesus withdrew to a deserted place, and that is where the crowds find him. After all, they have heard the news about John, as well.

What a contrast there is between these two stories, but how can we understand the full impact of the miracle without knowing of the disaster which precedes it? There is a pattern of threat and withdrawal which occurs repeatedly in Matthew. The baby Jesus is threatened by King Herod (in this case Herod the Great), and the family withdraws to Egypt and later to Galilee. In the course of his ministry Jesus withdraws under threat from the Pharisees who have decided to kill him. He also withdraws, as we have read, following the death of John. But, these are not simple strategic retreats in the interest of self protection. They are spiritual journeys, seeking strength and guidance for an ultimate showdown yet to come. Those who follow Jesus on this journey are offered healing, and in today's lesson, feeding, too.

This is a reminder to us that kingdom moments happen in some dark times. Another way of saying that is that miracles aren't really miracles until hope has vanished. They are created, not out of the stuff we can throw together, but when we've got nothing left to throw at a grave problem.

Some years ago, I worked closely with a pastor who spent most of his ministry working among the Dalit people of India. These are the Untouchables who form the lowest strata of Indian society. I wondered at the time why he had become interested in this particular group in the first place, and he told me that when he was graduating from seminary, a trusted professor had challenged him to begin his ministry in a place where he could not possibly succeed. "That way," the teacher told him, "whatever good comes of the situation, you will know it was not your doing but God's alone."

It was challenging advice to my friend, because he came from a wealthy New England family. His upbringing had trained him how to buy his way out of difficulties or how to use family connections to obtain advantages that others could never hope to have. His professor knew that if he went to be among the Untouchables, none of those advantages would help.

But, would there be any help? My friend found himself thrown to his knees time and time again by intractable, heartbreaking troubles. His education provided no way out from those problems. His money gave no solutions. His good intentions

could not remedy them. He experienced completely his own powerlessness. But he also experienced the power of the gospel in the life-giving spirit of those who had been touched by Christ and sought to share Christ with others. Even there, in the very worst places you can imagine, he saw miracles. Especially there. My friend is now past retirement, and I know that he wouldn't trade a minute of those experiences for a lifetime of "comfortable" assignments.

You and I don't often find ourselves in a place of dire need. That may lead us to complacency rather than thanksgiving, a sense of entitlement rather than of gratitude. We don't want to think about being in such a place and are happy to keep the conversation away from people who are. Yet, there are enemies against whom we are powerless. There are crushing forces that we cannot withstand no matter how hard we try. And when we fail to tell that part of the story, we also miss out on an even greater one: there is a hope beyond our feeble hope. There is a power beyond our finite power. There is a love that far transcends our narrow circle of concern.

All of this means that the good news of the gospel is up to the task of dealing with the bad news of our world. The life-giving ministry of Christ is ready to take on the death-dealing agenda of the powerful and the self-absorbed. The forgiving and reconciling message of Jesus is equipped to confront the petty and mean-spirited work of a sinful humanity. The healing work of Christ is prepared to

take on the forces of disease and despair. The nourishing ministry of Jesus is set to provide relief for hungry people, hungry in both body and soul.

That's something we all need to experience, but it may happen only when hope seems dim, and we've exhausted our own resources, but we're willing to follow Jesus to a lonely and forlorn place. Then, he will feed us, and we'll have a story to tell, not simply a part of the story, but the whole story. We can tell it to each other, and to our children, too.

Amen.