

“The Breadth, Length, Height and Depth of Love”

July 28, 2024

Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

This story about Jesus feeding the multitudes with a few loaves of bread and a little fish is one of the few stories found in all four gospels. That’s a pretty strong clue that there’s something more going on in this story than meets the eye. Every story, every good story, has layers of meaning that can be mined to let us go deeper and deeper so they can help shape us. Stories in the Bible are no exception.

On the surface this story is about a miracle of food appearing from nowhere through Jesus’ words of gratitude. But when we look deeper, instead of trying to explain what happened and how, but really look at what this story means, we discover it’s not about feeding a bunch of hungry people in a field. This is a story about generosity and abundance. The real miracle is realizing that generosity always uncovers abundance.

The Jesus of John’s gospel is different from the Jesus in the other gospels. In the others Jesus always teaches through parables, stories that reveal something about the nature of God’s kingdom. So, we have the parable of the “Prodigal Son” or better, “the welcoming Father.” Or we have the story of the Sower who sows seed indiscriminately, not caring where it might land as a way of thinking about how the gospel is meant to be lived in the world.

But the Jesus in John’s gospel never tells a story. What we find there are a lot of encounters and healings, even a resuscitation, that provide an entry into deeper awareness of God. In John’s gospel, Jesus enacts parables. What he does points beyond himself to a bigger reality unfolding. That’s what’s happening in the feeding of the multitudes. This story is an enacted parable about abundance and generosity.

Jesus does this in response to his disciples who are trapped in the assumption of scarcity. Scarcity is an insidious disease that works its way into our psyches and causes us to look on others with suspicion and fear and compels us to hoard what we have and protect what’s ours because there isn’t enough to go around. It works the other way, too. If you believe there’s only so much prosperity and power to go around, for instance, then you’ll be inclined to look on others outside your group as competitors—whatever they gain is your loss and whatever you gain is their loss. It’s called “zero-sum” thinking. And it can lead to not just mean and petty behavior, but to violence against those who are seen as a threat.

Jesus wants to release his disciples from this trap. He wants to show them a world where abundance is real and scarcity an illusion. So, he turns to them to ask how they can feed this great crowd that’s gathered. What follows is a demonstration of God’s power through words and actions. God provides when we trust one another and reach out to one another in generosity and love.

This story is coupled with another scene that’s familiar. The disciples set out on the Sea of Galilee and a storm comes up that threatens to capsize them. But suddenly, coming across the

water toward them, they see Jesus walking out telling them not to fear. Again, there are layers to be explored in this story. Traditionally it's seen as a demonstration of Jesus' command of the elements. It affirms his dominance and assures his followers he's the real deal, the I Am. But what does this story mean for us? It can be used as evidence that Jesus is dominant and we're on the winning team. But I think it's more than that. I think it's meant to encourage us to hold fast to our attachment to Jesus and the way of Jesus even when life is chaotic and out of control.

Remaining steadfast no matter what comes our way is the prayer of the writer of Ephesians. This writer encourages the community to remain steadfast and prays they'll be strengthened in their inner being, rooted and grounded in love. Beneath these words I suspect is a reality that threatens to undermine their trust. It could be they're experiencing pressure from authorities to conform and turn back to the Roman state religion of Caesar worship or they may be targeted for harassment by local groups while the authorities look the other way. The point is life for the Christians in Ephesus isn't easy and this writer wants to encourage them.

Notice they're not told to fight against their antagonists. They're not told to eradicate their enemies. The writer's hope is they'll experience the height, depth, length and breadth of love, the full measure of God's presence among them. If they give up their principles for the sake of survival then everything is lost.

Remaining generous, remaining loving in a context of hostility and threat is the greatest challenge followers of Jesus face. It's so much easier to give in to our fears. It's so much easier to keep what we have close to us and protect ourselves rather than be generous. The world tells us that's the smart thing to do. If we want to survive we have to stop being idealistic and get tough. Recently I read a quote from an evangelical minister representing Christian nationalism who says he wants to crush his enemies and says, "I don't think Jesus is particularly helpful here." That kind of rhetoric is what exposes Christian nationalism for the fraud it is. It's not Christianity; it's fascism and we're called to resist it.

But our resistance is through love. We resist by remaining generous. No matter what challenge we face, no matter how scarce things seem or how stormy the sea, we remain rooted and grounded in love. We reach out and open our arms wide to give what we have so others are fed. We welcome and accept and include all those who want to join us in following Jesus and living his love in the world. And we see others who worship in different ways, not as competitors but partners in revealing the Divine Presence in the world. We learn from people of other faiths and traditions and stand alongside those who are targeted for harassment or violence because of their faith or heritage or gender identity. That's how we "comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

That love is revealed through us. Jesus turns to his disciples to ask how to feed the masses who are hungry. He implies it's up to them, and then he shows them how it's done. Now it's our turn. We're called upon to feed those who are hungry. We're called upon to give of what we have so others will have what they need. We're called upon to put aside our fears of scarcity and trust God's provision through acts of lavish generosity. We're called upon to uncover the abundance that exists when we extend the breadth, length, height and depth of love.

That doesn't mean there won't be stormy seas. It doesn't mean there won't be times when fear and despair will threaten to undo us. In those times we rely on Christ with us. We remember we are not alone in these efforts but are rooted and grounded in a love that overcomes every challenge and chases away every fear. Our world needs the love we bring now more than ever, as forces are joining to claim we need to hoard what we have and protect what's ours. We can't give in to those who want to coerce and disempower others who don't fit their mold. We worship a God who gives lavishly and who calls us to generosity, to reveal God's kingdom of love, compassion and justice. Trust in God who loves us and empowers us to love and open your arms wide to feed a hungry world.

Amen