

5000 men, huh? Well, if attendance then was anything like it is now, that must have meant about 15000 women and a passel of children! So, really, those loaves and fish fed about as many people as attend a sold-out Cavaliers game! I'll come back to this part of the story a little later on.

Yesterday, I officiated the memorial of one of the church's most faithful participants and attendees, Bill Henschel. Even up to a few weeks ago, Bill logged into our service using his iPad. Bill, along with his wife Betty, readily served the LCPC congregation for almost 60 years. One of the things Betty could never reconcile was how that which meant so much to them—their faith, the community they found in the church—never connected with their children in such a way that they regularly attended and served with a church. It genuinely vexed and confused her. You see, she and Bill believed in the power of God through Jesus to make their lives whole, no matter the situation. Their belief meant everything to them, and it is what grounded them. How could it not make the same sense to their children's generation?

I suspect for many of you, the Henschels' story resonates. How is it that something that has such a value in your life is mostly void for those whom you love so dearly? It amazes you. And yet, you know that the people that you love are good people—people who have good days and bad days; people who make good choices and bad choices; people who are capable of offering so much love, and contributing so much good to the world. And you wonder, “how is it that the church, and the gospel, don't play a more significant role in their lives?”

Am I onto something here?

Well, here's reason number 422 why I'm glad that I have Jesus as my guide: because I hear in today's reading that Jesus is just as dumbfounded as Betty Henschel; that Jesus' heart hurts as much as mine – well, probably more. And Jesus knows that there is only so much he can do, and at some point there's a time to move on.

There's a word that caught my ear as AnneMarie was reading this section of the text: (*Jesus' family*) took offense at him. It wasn't quite as simple as, "We know this kid and all the trouble he got into as a boy. So, even though he's teaching with wisdom we're not gonna listen to him." No, they took offense at him! I think you'll find interest in the Greek word here. It is one you will recognize: *Skandalizō*.

They were "scandalized" by Jesus' teaching!

*Skandalizo* literally means "to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way" or "to cause a person to begin to distrust and desert one whom they ought to trust and obey."

What did Jesus do to cause this to happen to people? He taught the truth.

If I were in a media station and had a hot key right now, I'd push the sound clip of Jack Nicholson, from *A Few Good Men*, saying, "You want the truth? You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!"

Somehow what Jesus was saying or doing was hitting his home community's hot keys. It's possible that whatever Jesus was saying or doing was scandalous or offensive to them, in that it was challenging the powers of Temple and Empire. It's also possible that he was asking of them to make radical changes in their way of being, in their understanding of what God requires of them. Perhaps it was a combination of the two: and if the latter felt like it would cause them to rebelliously lean

into the former, then that fomented a whole lot of discomfort. So, their convenient excuse was to say, “This hometown boy is full of bunk.” And instead of actually taking the time to consider what he was teaching, they chose to shut it down and not even give him a chance to make a difference in their lives. Sometimes asking for too much change can cause folks to shut down – and shut down they did, and they shut Jesus out!

Is it any wonder, then, that while still ruminating on his personal disappointment, Jesus instructed his disciples to “shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against those who will not welcome you and refuse to hear you?”

I’m going to chalk this one up to Jesus’ humanity. We know how easy it is to get bitter and disillusioned when things don’t go the way we know they “ought” to go. And, obviously, Jesus knew the power his teachings had to transform lives! Harkening back to the parable of the seeds he told earlier, the success rate of the Word of God landing in fertile soil so that it takes root, thrives, and bears harvestable fruit is about one out of four! Are these really the odds for the gospel seed to grow and bear fruit in the lives of those who hear it? Looking around at the growth of the so-called “Nones” – those who may believe in a higher Being, but who are completely disconnected from religious institutions – it would seem that the 1 in 4 success rate may even be low!

But here’s the hope. The Spirit of God has the power to cultivate seeds in ways that we may never know. I like to believe that for an unknown period of time after Jesus left his hometown, something happened along the way that made the things he taught all of a sudden take root in someone’s

heart. I can just hear one of his relatives say to themselves, “Dad-blame that boy! I didn’t want to believe the things he was saying, but I can’t get over how true it was!” And, just to add the play on words, “Thank you, Jesus!”

Tell me if THIS also resonates with you: that you’ve borne witness to miraculous changes in someone you care about when you were sure there was no turning back?! Perhaps that was even you yourself.

Honestly, I don’t know if James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and Jesus’ sisters ever show back up in the gospel stories, but I know his mother does. Even in Mark where there is no birth narrative, or previous mention of Jesus’ family, we hear Mary’s name in this text...and Mary *will* show up again at Jesus’ crucifixion and to prepare his body for burial and at his resurrection. Who’s to say if Mary’s witness to her family won’t move their hearts so that they believe in what the one they thought they knew so well had tried to teach and show them.

But no matter – here I am working hard to sow faith in those that even Jesus moved on from!

What does matter is that many did believe;

that, many have believed;

that, many still do believe!

Because with such belief, deeds of power may be accomplished.

This is what the final story in today’s reading is about. On the surface, it appears to be about feeding a hungry crowd. And while I don’t want to diminish the impact of feeding those who lack

enough food, this story is also about feeding spiritual hunger, and it is directly connected to what we've already been talking about. The clue that this is an allegory is in the number of pieces of bread and fish Mark chooses for Jesus to distribute to the crowd. When one pays attention to the Hebrew Scriptures, which were "the Bible" of Jesus' time, five and two equate to *their* Word of God. The Pentateuch is what we know of as the first five books of the bible—they speak of the covenant God made with the people of Israel to be bound together. The two fish represent the Law and the Prophets, which will be revealed in a much less veiled way when Moses and Elijah show up at the occasion of Jesus' transfiguration. Elizabeth Leung will elucidate you about that in much more detail next week!

But it is important that we understand what is happening here. All these people have been seeking Jesus—all of these people are hungering for what he has to share. One of Jesus' points is that he really isn't teaching anything new. All the people need are contained in the Law and the Prophets – Jesus boils it down to two commandments: "'30...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. '" (Mk 12:30-31) The problem is that the people have been affected by too many *Skandalizoi*. There are so many impediments that they are unable to find the way to God. This is why Jesus is here: to encourage them to remove the obstacles and find their way back into the fullness of relationship with God.

As I reflected on the Loaves and Fish story in relation to the story of Jesus' rejection by his home community, I found myself chuckling over the phrase that Jesus took the elements and first "looked up to heaven" before he blessed and broke them. "O God of my spiritual ancestors," he seems to be

saying with that act, “this didn’t go so well back in Nazareth. Please, let’s do better today!” His prayer worked! As those folks sat in groups of hundreds and of fifties, all were served and sated. And what remained were 12 broken pieces left to tell the story. That is, 12 extremely human disciples serving as primary witnesses to what this Jesus did, and who this Jesus was.

Well, 12 authorized witnesses. How about those 5000 men, 15000 women and children who each had their own story to tell?

You see, what was given to them from Jesus—as passed on by his disciples—was enough. It was enough to fill them on that day, and, I dare say, to give them enough assurance that surely the presence of God was in that place and wherever else they would go. And then (*pointing to the communion table*) anytime from then on that bread was broken and fish consumed—a very frequent occurrence!—they would remember, and know, that they were not alone. That the realm of God was with them then, and it would continue to be with them until it comes into its fullness.

Friends, I don’t know how or why any of us believe this. But each time we are fed at this table, or in those moments when the grace of God breaks through into our lives, we are the ones commissioned to share this good news with others...and we can trust the power of the Holy Spirit to do what She needs to do to give us the strength to fulfill Christ’s teaching—that is, to BE LOVE—in the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.