

Proper 12, Year B

July 26, 2015

John 6:1-15 *After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

In our Gospel lesson, a large crowd descends upon Jesus and his disciples – about 5000 folk. Whereupon Jesus turns to his disciple Philip and asks, “Where can we buy enough bread for these people to eat?” The Gospel reading tells us that Jesus asked Philip this question in order to test him. But what is it that Jesus is testing? Philip’s problem-solving capabilities? his resourcefulness?

I would suggest that what Jesus is testing is Philip’s consciousness – whether Philip’s mind is mired only in the physical dimension, or whether Philip is open to that spiritual realm which is always present, but requires a different awareness and openness to God. Another way of putting it is: Will Philip see only with the eye of the flesh, or will he be open to **seeing** with the eye of the soul and **responding** from that awareness?

Our Gospel story gives us the answer: “Six months’ wages would not be enough to buy food for each of them to have just a crumb,” Philip replies. There you have it: Philip is seeing with his physical eye only. And his fellow disciple Andrew is no better: **He** sizes up the resources *he* can see available, and comes up woefully lacking: one boy has 5 barley loaves and two dried fish. The situation is hopeless when viewed only through the eye of the flesh, when seen only from the mindset of *physical* reality, with no awareness of the spiritual realm. Both Philip and Andrew fail the test; their consciousness is stuck in the physical realm.

And I daresay that they are not alone, for that is where a majority of *us* live most of the time (at least I do). In the physical realm, we deal with the harsh reality that there isn’t always enough to go around: not enough money, not enough time, not enough energy. We live with the reality of deficit: our nation’s budget deficit, trade deficit, the great debts under which we and many

nations like Greece suffer, our deficits of energy, people, and money in our own parish, our **personal** struggles to make ends meet. We don't have enough money to pay all the bills at once, so we pick and choose which we will pay, and when. The result of living with chronic deficits is that we live with an unconscious, underlying assumption that *everything* in life -- from money to worthiness to abilities to energies to resources to acceptance and love -- everything is in short supply. It is the way most of us have come to look at the world, and that unconscious belief has certainly been reinforced by the experience of so many in our world who struggle just to put food on the table and a roof over their head. There just doesn't seem to be enough! We live with a scarcity mentality, and so I daresay that **we** would probably have reacted to Jesus' testing just the way that Philip and Andrew did: with a sense of hopelessness. There are way too many needs, and way too few resources.

But Jesus is determined to bring to the situation the reality of the **spiritual** realm, the Kingdom of God, which Philip and Andrew are not seeing, and therefore not allowing. We are told at the beginning of our Gospel story that Jesus led them up a mountain, the place where heaven and earth meet. Jesus is the very embodiment of the meeting between heaven and earth, and he will now show what happens when the spiritual world is allowed to penetrate the physical.

Nowhere else in all of the Gospels is it mentioned that there is grass on the ground – *only* in the story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. **John** says there is a LOT of grass; **Mark** tells us that it is green grass (6:39). There is an unmistakable connection here with the 23rd Psalm, for Jesus makes the people sit down on the green grass, just as in the Psalm:

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

Jesus makes the people sit down in green pastures, for he is going to restore the soul of the people. Fr. John Shea writes: “When the divine and human meet, this is what happens. The Spirit of God enters into the human spirit, as food is taken into the body, fills that spirit to its capacity (they ate ‘as much as they wanted’ [v.11]) and completely ‘satisfies’ its innate hunger for spiritual nourishment. This process is never exhausted, as the twelve baskets of leftovers signify (v. 13).

“The large crowd that so impressed and disturbed the consciousness of the disciples is **not** daunting to the *spiritual* agenda of Jesus,” Fr. Shea continues. “*Physical* consciousness can only do division. It divides five barley loaves and two fish into five thousand and panics, ‘[W]hat are they among so many people?’ (v. 9). *Spiritual* consciousness [on the other hand] works by multiplication. It sees the five barley loaves and two fish of the small boy as the spiritual starting point.”

The spiritual starting point: We **have** resources! This is the conviction at the very center of Asset-Based Community Development: *we have assets!* They may be small, but they are gifts from God. Indeed, our very spiritual selves are gifts from God, who is the source of all life, the source of all abundance. Fr. Shea explains: “We are not our own, but we are sustained at each moment by the Spirit who is beyond us. This fills us with gratitude, and the gratitude overflows.

We distribute from our brimming fullness (our ‘cup overflows’ [Psalm 23:5]) to others. It is in this distributing, in this giving away, that the growth occurs. The *physical* law of **scarcity** can only understand giving away as a process of diminishment leading to nothing at all. The *spiritual* law of **abundance** understands giving away as a process of expansion leading to a sacred fullness.” (p. 190) We all know that it is true that when we give **love** away, we have more of it; it is this law of expansion upon giving, a law of the spiritual realm, that we see powerfully at work in our Gospel.

Perhaps it would be helpful to step back a moment and view today’s Gospel story from a symbolic perspective. Let go, for a moment, of the difficult task of getting your head around how it is that physical bread and actual fish are multiplied, and see the bread and fish as symbols of the soul-restoring power of the Holy Spirit. We can see, according to the story, that the growth is incremental: “It begins by taking what soul consciousness we have, however immature and undeveloped [it is a boy – and a little boy, at that, according to the original text – who has the loaves and fish]. Then we acknowledge the groundedness of our soul in [God’s Spirit (the people are made to sit down on the ground)], and [we] open [ourselves] to its influence. This allows the qualities of [God’s Spirit] to pass through our souls into our intellect, will, and affections. Now our actions are soul [saturated]. In symbolic language, we are now distributing our loaves and fishes. With each distribution more Spirit is released. Since it is the nature of Spirit to give itself, it grows and becomes more fully present in mind, will, and affections. Therefore, the first action unfolds into a second, the second into a third, and on and on...

“Our soul is restored by exercise. With each exercise, its influence multiplies. Since it **is** our *true* identity, we feel satisfied. We need not worry about scarcity: There is no scarcity in the spirit (John 3:34).” (pp. 193-194)

I think that if we try first to understand the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish on that symbolic level, we can easily appreciate that just as **love** multiplies as it is given away, so *the Spirit of God* is increased as it is shared with others. Our souls are satisfied in the process, for giving away God’s Spirit is what our souls were created to do.

Now we can take that symbolic, *spiritual* interpretation of our Gospel story and put it back into the actual physical realm. Does it not make sense that what is taking place on the spiritual level, when allowed to interpenetrate the physical level, creates a corresponding multiplication in the physical sphere? In fact, I would argue that we have seen it happen, right here in this parish. Three years ago, we were confronted with the overwhelming physical needs of those folk in Colorado Springs who had lost their homes in the Waldo Canyon Fire. One person in our parish got the idea that our small church family might do something that could make a difference. It seemed at the time that what our small church might do would be no different than trying to feed 5000 folk with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. But the response was overwhelming, and the outpouring of gifts for the fire victims grew into something far greater than we could have imagined. The same can be true when we allow God’s Spirit to flow through our minds, our wills, and our affections as we address the great needs in our own community, looking outward in our Asset-Based Community Development programs, or as we address any of the other seemingly overwhelming needs and deficits in our lives and in the world. For it is all rooted in

the Spiritual realm, where the laws are not the laws of division, but of multiplication; and God's life-giving Spirit grows and overflows in abundance as we allow it to pour forth from our souls.

AMEN

*Quotes from John Shea are taken from his book *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.