

## Proper 12B Sermon

July 29, 2018

*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 – about 5000 folk! – descends upon Jesus and his disciples. Whereupon Jesus turns to his disciple Philip and asks, “Where can we buy enough bread for these people to eat?” We are told 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 fixed *only* in the **physical** dimension, or whether Philip is open to that *spiritual* realm which is **always** present, but requires a different awareness. 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 place of 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. Philip is seeing with his physical eyes only. And his fellow disciple Andrew is no better: **He** sizes up the resources *he* can see available, and comes up woefully lacking: one young 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 dimension of reality.

And I daresay that they are not alone, for I think that is where most of *us* live, most of the time (at least **I** do). In the physical realm, we deal with the mindset that there isn’t enough to go around: not enough money, not enough time, not enough energy. We live with this mindset of deficit on many levels: we worry about our nation’s budget deficit, trade deficit, etc. Here in our own parish, we face deficits of personal energy, people, and money (as do most churches

these days). In our personal lives, some of us, from time to time, 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 the mindset of chronic deficit 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. Let's face it: It is the way most of us have come to look at the world. 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 *deeper* 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.

When the divine and human meet, the Spirit of God enters into the human spirit just like food is taken into the body. The Spirit of God then fills the human spirit to its capacity (symbolized by the 5000 people eating 'as much as they wanted') and completely 'satisfies' the human spirit's innate hunger for spiritual nourishment. This process is never exhausted, as the twelve baskets of leftovers signify.

John Shea writes: "The large crowd that so impressed and disturbed the consciousness of the disciples is **not** daunting to the *spiritual* agenda of Jesus. *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."<sup>1</sup>

The spiritual starting point. Our resources may be small, like the 5 loaves and 2 fish, but they are gifts from God. Indeed, our very *lives* 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 [to others] from **our** brimming fullness (our 'cup overflows' [as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says])... [And] 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."<sup>2</sup> We all know 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. Then other details in the story take on symbolic

significance. Noting that spiritual growth is incremental, Fr. Shea writes: “It begins by taking what soul consciousness we have, however immature and undeveloped [symbolized by the fact that it’s a young boy who has the loaves and fish]. Then we acknowledge the groundedness of our soul in [God’s Spirit (symbolized by Jesus making the people sit on the ground)], and [we] open [ourselves] to [the Spirit’s] influence [we taken in the loaves and fish]. 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).”<sup>3</sup>

If we try first to understand the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fish on that symbolic and spiritual 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. And our souls are satisfied in the process, since giving away God’s Spirit is what our souls were created to do, and giving spirit produces more spirit.

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 in the spiritual realm, when allowed to interpenetrate the physical realm, creates a corresponding effect – even multiplication! – in the physical sphere? In fact, I would argue that we have seen it happen right here in Canon City.

Just three or four years ago, the problem of people suffering homelessness in our community seemed intractable. There were few homes or apartments to rent or buy, which drove up the price of housing. When some unforeseen expense occurred in the life of an individual or family living on the edge – a broken hip, a car accident, a divorce, a child diagnosed with diabetes, or what have you – these individuals and families found themselves unable to pay the rent or mortgage, and they ended up without a place to live. Others in our community suffered from some mental or physical illness that made it impossible for them to hold a job.

Then the seed of an idea arose in the minds and hearts of some compassionate people in Fremont County – an idea which at first seemed *crazy*, and impossible to attain: building an apartment building for those suffering homelessness! It had never before been done in a rural Colorado community. But that idea multiplied, like the loaves and fishes in our Gospel, multiplied through the hearts and minds of compassionate folk in Fremont County, and as they gave their abilities and energies toward this goal, they found that others *outside* Fremont County – from Denver to Wisconsin to New York – were of a similar mind and heart.

I was privileged to see the fruit of this multiplication of gifts and talents and time and energy and compassion this past week at the Grand Opening of Journey Home, an apartment building here in Canon City which now houses 45 people (including 14 children) who previously had been

homeless for an average of 12 months. Given the stability of a place to live and support services on site, 6 of those people have already found jobs.

And here's the thing: the crazy idea for this project originated from an organization – Loaves and Fishes of Fremont County – which started on the back porch of our Christ Church office over 30 years ago. So, in a real sense, we can say that this crazy idea of an apartment building for the homeless, Journey Home, can trace its origin back to members of Christ Church, just like us, decades ago. *We* spawned Loaves and Fishes, which in turn multiplied, and in turn spawned Journey Home!

My friends, this is what happens when the spiritual realm is allowed to penetrate the physical. What happens when we seek first the Kingdom of God in our hearts and minds and lives and community; when we have the spiritual consciousness of abundance.

At the Grand Opening ceremony, DeeDee Clement, Director of Loaves and Fishes (whom I truly believe is a modern day saint), was the last person to speak. She ended her remarks by saying, “I am a person of faith, and I believe that God has worked through every step of this process. And I can't wait to see what God will do next!”

It's what happens when our consciousness is wide open to the spiritual realm, the Kingdom of God all around us, where the Holy Spirit is a powerful reality and the law of love holds sway. For love, when given away, multiplies abundantly.

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 190.

2 *ibid.*

3 *ibid.*, pp. 193-194