

Homily for August 2nd, 2020 – 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Of all the miracles Jesus performed this is the only miracle found in all four gospels. The Early Church must have thought this story was indispensable in the lives of people. They just had to tell this story. In fact, it is found twice in the Gospel of Matthew.

Opening lines are very telling. This is the opening line of today's gospel account: ***When Jesus heard that Herod had beheaded John the Baptist, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.*** What do you do when your best friend, your greatest ally (the greatest of all the prophets) is killed because he spoke up for you? The first thing you do is mourn. Jesus is mourning, but no one shows him compassion. And when you mourn, you want to be by yourself. Men and women grieve differently. Women mourn among themselves face to face and they find words. Men, on the other hand, do not mourn face to face but shoulder to shoulder, and they lose words. Women can sit in a circle with other women and share feelings. Men sit on barstools shoulder to shoulder never looking into another man's eyes hoping the pain will go away on its own. When it comes to dealing with grief, women are way ahead of us men, and we men have got lots to learn from them. Men need to do something physical to deal with grief. Until recently, when machinery took over, men would physically dig the grave of a loved one who passed away. This was an important act for the male to deal with his grief. Carrying a heavy coffin, shoulder to shoulder with other men, was another important gesture for males dealing with grief.



Getting back to the story: Jesus is not digging a grave, but he is rowing a boat across the Sea of Galilee. He is doing something physical that will help him with his grief. We are told the crowd was going on foot to where they figured Jesus was rowing towards, so that when he got there, they

were already waiting for him. I believe, although the story does not say so

explicitly, that when Jesus arrived on the opposite shore, he looked into the crowd's face and saw his own. In the faces of all these needy people, he saw the face of his own need. Satisfied people do not, generally, make an effort to walk halfway around a lake, but needy people will do such a thing and more.

So, when the needy Jesus looked into the face of all these needy people, the gospels say that **he had compassion for them**. In another account it says **his heart went out to them**. It's like his chest rips open and his heart races out to meet people in their need. He is very much like the father in the prodigal son story. In that story, all the repentant son has to do is turn in the direction of home, and his father races toward him with compassion, with a ring for his finger, and with a new robe for his back. Jesus is doing the same thing here. Although Jesus does not receive compassion for the loss of his cousin, John the Baptist, it does not stop him from giving compassion to others.

Jesus knew something about the spiritual world that those people then and most of us, here and now, do not know. This is what he knew: whatever you want more of in life, start by giving it away. You see, in the spiritual world you only have what you give away. In the very act of giving it away, it multiplies. The spiritual world works by multiplication. The physical world is just the opposite. In the physical world, as you give things away, you have less and less and less until you have nothing. In that world, the more you divide what you have among more and more people, the less each person ends up with. The physical world does not increase by multiplication but decreases by division.

Notice, this story is called the story of the multiplication of the fish and loaves not the story of the division of the fish and loaves. So, when you give, always give from a place of spirit within yourself. It is a place of abundance that creates more abundance. If you ignore this spiritual space within you, you will give from the physical world and grow frustrated, angry, and maybe even despise the people you are giving to.



Jesus, by giving away fish and loaves and by giving from the space of spirit, the space of abundance from within himself, the fish and loaves multiply. So now you know, this is not a magic trick exclusive to Jesus because he is the Son of God. It is something we call all do. Had he taken the advice of the apostles, who do not know about the world of spirit but only about the physical world, he would have sent the crowd away and, with that, the fish and loaves would have divided and disappeared. You see, in the very act of giving, the giver gets caught up and is carried forward in the abundance as well. Jesus found the compassion he was looking for by giving compassion away to the crowd.

You want more love in your life? Give love away. Well, wait a minute. If I give it away, I'll have less. No, you will not. Stop thinking "physical." If you keep thinking "physical," you will make all the wrong moves in your spiritual growth. Remember, you are not primarily physical, although if I punch you in the gut, you'll probably buckle over. You are primarily spiritual. You are a child of the Divine who is pure Spirit. Your D.N.A. is spiritual. Jesus himself says, "**What is spirit is spirit, and what is flesh is flesh.**" In other words, we keep forgetting our truest and deepest identity is spirit, and so rarely give from that space. Our fundamental fault is not sin *per se* but forgetfulness.

Jesus speaks using many enigmas. One is: ***to those who have much, more will be given. And to those who have little, even what little they have will be taken from them.*** That doesn't seem fair. But when you look at it in the context of today's gospel, it starts to make real sense. Remember, what you give from the world of spirit can only multiply, so you get the sense that more is being given to you. When you give from a physical space, things divide and decrease, so you get the sense that something is being taken from you.

Think of a time when you were absolutely joyful in giving something to someone, and you never considered for one moment whether they deserved it or not. In that moment, you were touching on the abundant world of Spirit. You were giving from exactly the same space within you that Jesus gave the fish and loaves from. Now, think of another time where you gave reluctantly and grudgingly because you just knew this was a waste of your time, energy and money. Your joy became scarce. In both instances you were giving. One enriched your joy, the other diminished your joy.

Jesus uses fish and loaves to tell us about the dynamics of the spiritual life. What is true of fish and loaves is equally true of love, forgiveness, justice, and mercy. You want more of these? Learn to give them away. The moment you start feeling sorry for yourself, or feeling the world needs to give you a break, go and do something for someone else.

By doing something for the crowd that day, and not sending them away, Jesus, found an abundance of compassion in the most unlikely place.....in the hunger of ordinary people.

Fr. Phil