

Homily – July 28th, 2024 – 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time



The story of the feeding of the multitude apparently is the only “miracle” story that’s common to all four gospel writers.

However, John—our gospel writer today—prefers to use the word “signs,” over the word miracles. I think the reason he does this is that a miracle keeps you right where you are, in a place of awe, excitement and fascination. But a sign invites you forward

into deeper reflection. It was the great philosopher Socrates, as you may recall, who said, “the un-reflected (unexamined) life is not worth living.” Signs are meant to be seen through more than to be looked at. Signs never point to themselves but beyond themselves to a deeper reality. This deeper reality is the Kingdom of God. Jesus doesn’t want us to stop short of anything less than the Kingdom of God.

The gospel today starts off on a rather humdrum way by telling us that ***Jesus went up the mountain and sat down with his disciples***. As boring and routine as that sounds, even this is a sign. The mountain is the earth’s highest point, the closest it gets to the sky. People ascend the mountain; God descends the mountain. The mountain is where the divine and the human meet. Jesus is the meeting of the divine and the human. He sits because sitting is the position of the king, the teacher, the authority. What follows will be a teaching of how the divine and the human work together. I love what Fr. Richard Rohr says when he writes: Without God we cannot; without us, God will not. In other words, God could work independent of us but chooses not to. God’s greatest work was not the creation of the of the universe. It was, instead, what God did through the human flesh of Jesus and what God wants to do through you. Without us, God will not.

I think our faith works with and through signs, signs we get all the time but are rarely aware of. Miracles are more appealing and glamorous but, in the end, they

are short-lived and ask nothing of us. Jesus says that we don't have eyes to see (except what we want to see) or ears to hear (except what we want to hear), therefore the signs go right over our heads. But before we get too hard on ourselves, I want to say we come to faith—we come to seeing and hearing—gradually and in frustratingly slow stages.

Apart from Jesus, who is always the main character, let's look at the Apostles Philip and Andrew and the boy with the five barley loaves and the two fish as examples of how faith gradually, slowly, and with much resistance, emerges in us.

After sizing up the crowd, Jesus ask Philip, ***“Where are we to buy food for all these people to eat?”*** He said this to test him, but why Philip? Maybe it's because Philip is the practical, pragmatic one of the group, always calculating things in his mind to see if they make sense. He always looks before he leaps. More than the other apostles, Philip is cautious, never committing to anything before he has all the facts, all the pros and cons laid before him. He's full of common sense and meticulous about everything. Philip has his feet solidly on the ground, but he is of little use to Jesus in this moment. Philip crunching the numbers in his head, which he is so good at doing, concludes, ***“This can't be done, Jesus. Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”*** In his calculating mind, Philip concludes the resources are clearly too small and the need is obviously too great, therefore, it can't be done.

That's phase one of faith, which really isn't faith at all. Faith is so much more than assenting to a set of beliefs; it is an openness to possibilities. Philip just isn't open. He can't imagine the abundance of heaven pushing into the scarcity he sees all around him. He doesn't realize that he is in the presence of Jesus who is bringing heaven and earth together.

Phase two of faith is found in the next character, Andrew. Andrew has one gift, the gift of bringing people to Jesus. He doesn't know what to do, himself, but he knows Jesus will know what to do. In this story, Andrew comes across a little cynical even pessimistic. He wants to believe that Jesus can do something with

this hungry crowd, but he's reluctant in suggesting that maybe this boy with the five loaves and two fish could be part of the solution. It sounds ridiculous for Andrew to even suggest it, so he makes a joke of it. ***"What is that among so many people?"*** "Nothing can be done," says his mind even though his heart secretly hopes that he's wrong. This is phase two of faith. It opens the door to possibilities but does not whole-heartedly think anything will come of it. But Jesus needs only a crack; a possibility is more than enough for him to work with.

If Philip's stance is "It can't be done," and Andrew's position is "It might be done but highly unlikely" then the attitude of boy with the loaves and fish is, "Why not?" This is what Jesus delights in. When Jesus sees people open to receiving what he's trying to give them, he praises their faith. This kid has not only made Jesus' day, but he has also taught us much about the nature of God. This boy, who was probably running an errand for his mother, is the key to feeding the multitude. Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not. Without the boy, there is no miracle and the people go away hungry. The boy's willingness to share the little he had was the sign of God's own generosity, and this is what Jesus gives thanks for when he raises his eyes to heaven.

The boy is nameless like many other people we meet in the gospels. When a person is nameless, it usually means he or she is bigger than themselves. We are supposed to see ourselves, or at least our own potential, in these nameless characters.

Philip sees a door that is shut. Andrew sees a door open only a crack. The boy sees the door thrown wide open. The people are fed in their souls by the word of God and in their stomachs by bread and fish. Even though people satisfied, having eaten as much as they wanted, the miracle is not over. Jesus is not done.

"Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing will be lost," says Jesus.

There is a drive in Jesus, a drive that comes from his Abba, that not only are people's hungers to be fed but that we do something with the leftover fragments. Perhaps the fragments are not the leftover fragments of bread and fish but are

people themselves. Jesus is concerned with the people who are marginalized, almost forgotten, and who want just a little of our time and energy. All they want is to be able to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. All they want is to be acknowledged. All they want is to be invited and included. All they want is to know that their little, fragmented, seemingly leftover life means something to someone.

My brother Todd tells me about a time when he invited a few colleagues from his work over for a fun night of playing board games. Included was a single woman who was a bit of a recluse. She was an only child and dedicated her life between work and caring for her elderly parents, that's it. With some reluctance she finally accepted Todd's invitation to join the group at his house. She came and enjoyed herself immensely. For an entire year she spoke about the experience as if Todd had given her a million dollars. A simple invitation, not fish and loaves but beer and chips, fed a person's soul for an entire year.

The miracle didn't stop 2000 years ago. It was only a foretaste of the banquet to come where we will finally learn what to do with leftovers.

~Fr. Phil