At a meeting this past week, one of our wardens reminded me of the story of a pastor in North Texas, whose church is growing. Earlier this year in this year of economic downturn, a church leader suggested to his congregation at Cross Timbers Community Church that if they found themselves in financial distress and needed some money to survive that they were welcome to take from the collection plate instead of giving to the church. And some did as they had need. But even more gave more generously. His invitation to reverse the collection plate started a movement of helping others that has led to a level of abundance and giving that no one anticipated, no one but God, perhaps. As people heard the story more people came to see the miracle that was happening in this church. In the past two months the pastor has given away a half million dollars to members and non-members.

I am not suggesting that we should adopt this practice today at the offertory – although it is tempting – but what I do want to suggest is that we might want to look at the miracle of the feeding of the multitude in today’s Gospel as an abundance story not unlike the story of the church in North Texas.

Jesus crosses to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and with his disciples he goes up the mountaintop where a crowd follows. Jesus asks Philip "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." A Roman denarius was a day's wage and it would have taken a fortune in denarii to feed the multitude. Andrew says "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" It was a rhetorical question. Now bread made of barley was the food of the poor. Jesus had these poor people sit down on the grass. There were 5000 in all, but we know that only the men were counted so there must have been many thousands more women and
children who had followed Jesus up the mountain.

Jesus takes the loaves and fishes, gives thanks, and distributes the food. When all the people had had their fill, when they were satisfied, Jesus asked that the fragments be gathered up so that nothing would be lost. And from the fragments of the five barley loaves they filled 12 baskets (7 in Mark’s Gospel). From the crumbs of the barley loaves many baskets full were left over to feed even more of the poor. In God’s economy nothing is lost, my friends, but 12 (7) baskets full?

I do not want to debunk this miracle story, but I suggest that the miracle of the feeding may indeed by like the reverse collection plate at Cross Timbers Community Church. Jesus took the baskets of bread and fish to the people and they put more in than they took out. They all ate and were satisfied, but many were generous with what was in their travel bags and refilled the baskets as Jesus passed among them. Do I know this to be true? Well, no, I don’t. I was not there, I was not an eye witness.

John’s story of the Sermon on the Mount is derived from the oral tradition rather than an eye witness account This Sermon on the Mount feeding miracle has been received by telling and retelling and telling again. Most people agree that this is a true story because the only miracle story to appear in all four of the gospels. And it is easy to interpret today’s Gospel as a foretelling of the Eucharistic story. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus follows the liturgical formula – he takes the loaves, blesses, brakes and gives them to the people. In John’s version – in post-Easter time – John’s hearers and readers understood Jesus himself to be the bread, broken and given for believers – given for all people really – even for us.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus plays the host – he takes the bread, gives thanks, and gives it to his guests himself. There are two quite distinct ways to reenact the Eucharist. After the Eucharistic prayer – the Great thanksgiving – often the priest takes communion, partakes in the bread and wine first to invite the congregation to the table. The other way, as you may have noticed, is how I celebrate. I invite you all to the table as a first or second
century host might, offering the guests food, seeing that you all are filled, and only then
do I partake in the meal, served by you. It is a subtle difference, and not a truly
substantive one. I spoke with the Bishop about it and while he is of the first school of
thought he holds the other liturgical way of serving from the altar as valid and approves
of my philosophy of being the hostess who see to the needs of her flock before taking
food myself. The paring of these two ways of serving communion are not nearly as
interesting as the pairing of the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel today. David shows
himself as a very human human being when he takes Bathsheba – Uriah’s wife – as his
own. And from this David came our Savior Jesus the Christ.

Our patron saint Andrew is praised by some scholars for his resourcefulness in finding
the lad with the five barley loaves and two fishes. But most condemn Andrew (and
Philip) for doubting that Jesus could feed so many with so little. And from Jesus’s
miraculous feeding that followed Andrew and Philip’s unbelief we have the most
memorable of all of Jesus’s miracles. Could it be that those who have chosen our
lectionary readings saw what I see – that God uses us for God’s own purposes. We all are
human and make mistakes. We all have flaws. But God uses us – perfects us if you will
– so that God’s will will be done. Jesus the only truly perfect one came from the house of
David, perhaps from his union with Bathsheba, we do not know. Through David the
lineage to Jesus fulfilled the predictions of the prophets – through this imperfect one
came the perfect one. So it is with Andrew and Philip who were not perfect – but Jesus
used their doubting his power to make his miracle even more powerful. God uses our
human imperfections. God did not make David devise a scheme to remove his
“competitor” so that he could have Bathsheba as his wife – but God did use David –
warts and all – so that through him the Messiah would come. Likewise Andrew was used
to ask the ridiculous question “What are 5 loaves and two fishes among so many?” in
John’s community who knew the story well and knew that Jesus could provide all that
they needed. And surely the people at Cross Timbers know Jesus can provide for all their
needs.
If we were perfect would God’s word working in and through us be as powerful? My brothers and sisters, in God economy, nothing is lost. Even our flaws can be used for God’s good work. My prayer is that God will use us, warts and all, to do God’s work in the world so that all may be satisfied.