A Homily by The Rev’d Jo Popham

“Give Them Something to Eat” Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2011
Genesis 32:22-31
Matthew 14:13-21

If you noticed a slight limp as I approached the pulpit, it is probably because I have been wrestling with the texts for this Sunday. It is hard – really difficult – to find new perspectives on the story of the loaves and fishes.

Jesus began his ministry in earnest when John the Baptizer was arrested (Matthew 4:12-18). He left his home in Nazareth and went to Galilee to make his home in Capernaum by the sea. It was there by the sea that Jesus called his first disciples. And after the Pharisees saw Jesus’s healing power they began their plot, conspiring how to destroy him. Opposition to his work forced Jesus to move on, but on his way he healed many, always offering God’s mercy (Ibid. 12: 15-21). When Jesus heard that John had been beheaded by Herod, he sought out a place – deserted place by the sea – perhaps to reflect and mourn the loss of his cousin and friend, the Baptizer. But the crowds heard of the healings that Jesus had done, and they followed along the shoreline and appealed to Jesus to heal them when he came ashore. And he did. He had compassion for their needs, and he healed many. The crowd continued to grow far into the evening. The disciples came to Jesus and told him to send the crowd away so that they could go into nearby towns to get something to eat. But Jesus did not send the needy away. Instead he told the disciples: “You give them something to eat.”

It is hard not to focus entirely on the scope of the miracle of the feeding, of five loaves and two fishes feeding 5000 men along with the women and children who had followed our Lord. This feeding miracle does make us think back to other wilderness feedings and other miracles. And the feeding of the 5000 also makes us look forward to the Jesus’s institution of the Eucharistic meal. But it is the generosity of Jesus’s followers that most
touches my heart. The crowd likely had traveled with their own food rolled up in cloth. Many of those in the crowd probably contributed to the feast – adding more than they received, so that when they had all eaten their fill there were 12 baskets of food left over.

In this miracle Jesus modeled for the disciples; he taught them – and he is still teaching us – how to feed the hungry. In Matthew’s Gospel the disciples immediately go to work. They find the five loaves and two fishes. They understood what Jesus told them to do and they did it. “You give them something to eat.” They just did not understand how far the meager offering of five loaves of bread and two smoked fish would go in so large a crowd. They underestimated Jesus’s effect on the crowd – how his teachings would move hearts to give so that everyone might eat.

“You give them something to eat.” Jesus’s command transcends this miracle story and speaks directly to us all – to every reader and every hearer who has food to share with a hungry world.

There was a story in the news not so long ago of a pastor in North Texas, whose church is growing by leaps and bounds. At a time of economic downturn, this 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 noone anticipated, noone but God, perhaps. As people heard the story more people came to see the miracle that was happening in this church. The pastor has given away millions of dollars to members and non-members.

I am not suggesting that we should adopt this practice today at the offertory, 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 – a story that fulfills Jesus’s command that we give the hungry something to eat.

My brothers and sisters, it is God’s will that the hungry be fed. In Jesus’s time there was a concerted effort on the part of the Roman Empire to spread the belief that it was the pagan gods who supplied food through the emperor. But was it Caesar or our Lord who gave thanks, broke the bread, and divided the fishes to feed more than 5000? Was it Herod – the minion of the Empire who held elaborate feasts where the entertainment included delivering John the Baptist’s head on a platter – or was it Jesus who offered compassion to a hungry crowd?

Do we wait for governmental agencies to respond to the needs of the hungry or do we – out of our abundance – give them something to eat? We here at St. Andrew’s provide food for one another in times of crises, but we also support an interdenominational food bank, often focusing on contributions of baby food. But we also act as Jesus’s hands by being with the hungry at the Drop Inn Centre feeding the crowd there. In addition to our faithful lunch bunch” who routinely go to the Drop Inn Centre, the Youth Group also has adopted this ministry as one of their missions.

As you all know, I was from New Orleans until the flood waters after Hurricane Katrina drown our home and our hopes in eight feet of water – along with many many others. My husband and I and our grown son who lived six blocks away evacuated the morning before the storm hit, but many had no means of transportation and were trapped by the water. Many died from unnecessary neglect. There was little food or water for those who sought sanctuary in the Superdome and no food or water for those who went to the convention center for refuge. People starved to death in their homes praying for someone to come and help them while local, state, and federal government officials debated what to do. The Red Cross showed up with hot food in February of 2006. The storm had struck on August 29, 2005. Yes, there was plenty of blame to go around, but I
was blessed not to carry any bitterness from the experience for I had confidence that good things could come out of bad. And indeed God has brought good out of the bad – out of darkness has come light – out of hopelessness has come a chance for a new beginning – the starving have been taught to feed one another – and those who have much have learned to give out of their abundance so that others might eat and be filled. In the last six years many have come to aide New Orleans in her recovery. And for the most part those who came – and are still coming – to feed a starving city were – and continue to be – Christian volunteers. They heard Jesus’s command “give them something to eat.”

For many months after the storm my husband and I were in the Diaspora, but we were blessed to have enough. While we were homeless we chose which friend or family member to impose upon based on where there was good continuing education. We heard Jim Wallis speak at a seminar in Washington, DC. He told the crowd that throughout the world 30,000 children die every day from hunger. Every three seconds a child dies needlessly. Can we hear Jesus saying to us give them something to eat?

Jesus told his disciples – and he is telling us – “You give them something to eat.” May we hear, and, out of our abundance, may we respond. May we – having been fed at the Lord’s table – leave today prepared to feed the hungry with good things.

Amen.