

10th Sunday after Pentecost Year B - July 29, 2018
Mark 6:34-44, 2 Kings 4:42-44, Eph. 3:14-21
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HAPPY MEAL

High in the cool and lush Central Mountain region of Kenya there is a network of small Presbyterian congregations called Riamukurwe Parish. The founding pastor, Bernard Muindi, describes its mission in this way:

“We began with children as young as 2 and 3 years old, wandering from house to house looking for food. As a new young parish in 1997 we sought out these children.

“We began by giving them lunch, which for many served as breakfast and dinner, too. Then we saw that they had no place to live so we built a dormitory to give them housing and minister to them in a small way. Many of the children have no families, no parents. Others come from poor families. Their residential places are so poor. A two roomed hut may accommodate two parents and five children with very scanty beddings. Many sleep on the earth floor without a mattress and children may share one blanket. At times some households spend the night without food, hence no concentration in school.” End of quote.

Within 7 years they had completed a new dormitory, classroom building and guest quarters. On the grounds is a very large garden where food is grown for the resident children. One classroom is a workshop where young teen girls, on old Singer Sewing machines, make school uniforms and tote bags to sell in local markets. Today, the Parish program serves more than 150 children and teens.

While visiting the parish some years ago, I asked the women elders and parish leaders how such a small group, themselves nearly as impoverished as the children they serve, was able to embark on such a far-reaching ministry. They said simply, “We do what we can and God will do what we can’t.”

This parish comes to mind as I read today’s gospel story, where a seemingly paltry offering feeds a multitude.

The lectionary for today invites us to use the Feeding story from the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. Because John is a fourth gospel in a 3-year cycle, the lectionarians or whatever they’re called, try to give him his voice whenever possible, and this feeding story is one of the very few that all four gospels have in common. But, I chose to stay with Mark this week for a few reasons:

First, I simply point out that this story was smack dab in the middle of last week’s lesson for

Good Shepherd Sunday. I am glad the lectionarians, or whatever they're called, thought this story merited its own week. But let's stay with Mark to take note of the rich context in which Mark has placed it.

Earlier in Chapter 6 (v. 6a), Jesus sends the disciples off on their two-by-two mission, specifically ordering them to "take no provisions" – no backpack or bedroll, no water. No cellphone. No purse. No energy bars. "Take only your staff," he says. A staff being a basic shepherding tool, I would say this is our first clue that the Good Shepherd is equipping the Disciples for some shepherding of their own. They go off on their mission, depending entirely on the hospitality of strangers for their wellbeing.

Meanwhile, Mark tells the story of Herod's feast (vs. 14), with its grizzly outcome for John the Baptist. Imagine for a moment what that feast might look like: invited guests reclining in the way of the elite, served by nameless ones out of a bounty only a ruler could command.

Now return to Jesus and the disciples (v. 30) who have reconvened after the missionary work to debrief the experience. They had hoped to get away to a quiet place, but the word is out and people have crowded in from near and far. That brings us to today's passage (v. 34), where Jesus saw the crowd and "had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd."

He shifts into rabbi mode and begins to teach them many things.

But then it gets late and the disciples, watching out for Jesus and no doubt tired and hungry themselves, suggest the only practical way to deal with the crowd: Send them away to the countryside to buy their own food.

But Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

What? Jesus guaranteed that the disciples would be empty-handed when he ordered them to travel light.

In the Gospel of John's account, it is Andrew who answers, "Lord, even if we had a fortune at hand we could not feed them all!"

Andrew might be forgiven for his retort. Put yourself in his place. You're heading home after a long day at work. You're tired and hungry and ready for some R & R. You pull into the driveway and, Surprise, there are five thousand people waiting for supper.

Andrew feels a tug at his sleeve. He looks down and sees a child holding a parcel. "Mister, I've got a lunch. You can have my lunch." I can see Andrew respond with some exasperation, "Child, does your mother know where you are?"

Because now you've gotten home and all those people are waiting to eat and you gone inside and checked the fridge and cupboards and all you've got to feed them is a Happy Meal.

"What do you have?" Jesus asks.

"Five loaves and two fish, Lord. A child's lunch!"

"Bring it to me."

I bet you could have heard a pin drop as the child walks up to Jesus and places the parcel in his hands.

Now, here's the fun part:

Jesus orders the disciples to have the crowd lie down in small groups. I know, all the Bible translations, even the New Revised Standard version that we read today, say "sit", but the word translated here as 'sit' can also mean 'lie', and in this case, I think it is the better choice. In this section of two feasts we see Herod's party with its invited guests – the somebodies - reclining on comfy couches to be served. In this feast of our Lord, it is the nameless nobodies who recline to be served by the disciples.

And it gets better: Jesus tells the disciples to make them lie down 'in the green grass'.

"The Lord is my Shepherd...who makes me to lie down in green pastures." It isn't just Jesus any more who's the shepherd here. The disciples are shepherds, too.

And now it is the Lord's Supper, as Jesus *takes, blesses, breaks* and *gives* the food to the disciples to set before the people. The somebodies are feeding the nobodies in this Meal that turns the values of this world upside down.

And everybody eats. And there are more leftovers than what they started with!

It was impossible. It was impossible to feed all those people with that little lunch. But there were two people that day who did not know it was impossible: Jesus, who, John says, "knew what he would do", and the child, who did not concern himself with impossibilities but simply gave to Jesus what he had.

In one of my early Religious studies classes in college, Dr. Sackmann suggested that the Feast of the Five Thousand might not have happened just the way scripture says. What if, inspired by the generosity of the child, the others pulled out their own lunches and began to share? At the time the idea was shocking, even heretical to me, as one who was not yet unaccustomed to questioning scripture.

But since then I've come to appreciate Dr. Sackmann's insight.

First, the fact that Jesus had told the disciples to travel without provisions is a clue that people in that day and place would normally prepare well for the road. Second, it strains the imagination

to think that out of five thousand men *plus women and children*, only one person - and a child at that - remembered to bring a lunch.

So I can see how, once the crowd is settled into their Spiritual Growth Groups, they might just pool their provisions into a lovely picnic. After all, the transformation of the human heart It is just as much a miracle as the more magical version of the story. And a pretty good discipleship model, wouldn't you say, St. Thomas?

Preacher and scholar and beloved pastor, the late Fred Craddock, said of Mark that he "portrays Jesus as a strong opponent of the forces that cripple the human spirit."

How to un-cripple the Spirit?

Rev. Muindi of Riamukurwe Parish advises: "When one sees or meets a problem, he or she should attempt to deal with it rather than evading it."

It strikes me that this story's contribution to un-crippling of the spirit is its glorious witness to the power of meeting a problem head-on without concern for outcomes. It is perhaps the generous child or that little-parish-that-could, a world away in Kenya, that William Sloan Coffin had in mind when he said, "I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap and then you grow wings."

In the week ahead, may we watch and listen for promptings that might move us to offer our Lord whatever it is we have to give, and leave the miracles to "the one who by the power within us is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine."

Meanwhile, Children of God, get ready. It's almost time to eat!

AMEN