

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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By Alex Wimberly

Introduction

Here is a well known story of miracles, with ordinary conflict in almost every line. As we approach this familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand followed by the account of Jesus walking on water, let us take the extra -- and perhaps extraordinary -- step of checking in with ourselves. Are we coming to this passage eager or exhausted? With anxiety or with welcome? Already sure of what we will find, or wondering what more could be added?

We take a moment to breathe, to notice our mood, to note what we are hungering for, and to prepare our hearts and minds for a story about everyday conflicts and everyday miracles.

Text

John 6: 1-21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve

baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

Comment

Crowds gather because Jesus is healing people on a large scale and on a daily basis. Food for a few becomes a feast for thousands. Jesus walks upon the surface of a wide and wind-swept lake. It's a full day, miracle-wise.

But instead of drawing attention to the grand and unmistakable importance of miraculous healing, miraculous feeding and miraculous gravity defiance, John's descriptive narrative ("there was great deal of grass in the place") locates the drama within the interactions of ordinary people and in the tension of small moments and subtle conflicts.

Jesus went up and sat down on a mountain at the edge of a lake with two sides and two names. *Wait. Why are there two names?* A large, intrusive, hungry crowd draws close. *Oh. Is this a threat?* Jesus asks Philip a question to which he already knows the answer. *Typical!* He brings up the need for and the cost of bread, which raises the anxiety of his disciples and elicits the information about an inadequate supply of one boy's picnic. *What will they do?*

Then with the simple, eucharistic act of sharing what has been gratefully received, Jesus transforms a moment of anxiety into a sacrament, meeting the people's need and convincing them that he is the prophet who is to come into the world. So convincing is the miracle of the bread and fish that a new problem arises. Jesus has

to withdraw to prevent being taken 'by force' to be made king. In what seems a throwaway line, John indicates the possibility that this undated day in the midst of Jesus' itinerary will become Day 1 of the Great Revolution. But it doesn't. Jesus defuses the energy in the atmosphere just as quickly as he stirs it up. A remarkable day, an extraordinary day, but one that ends up as it began -- with Jesus withdrawing to a mountain.

A day like any other day and *unlike* any other day turns into an evening with similar qualities. The disciples head down to the boat, get in and start off. Ho hum. Jesus is not with them. And then the narrative gives us an everyday drama: a storm whips up. And then comes the extraordinary event: a figure appears on the water, nearing the boat. The disciples are terrified. What will happen? And then Jesus, casually making his way to them on the waves, calms them down. The terror of the unknown quickly becomes a welcome of the familiar. Ahhh. Another drama subsided.

At that point, John says the disciples wanted to take Jesus into the boat -- and '*immediately* they reached the land toward which they were going.' Yet another miracle in a string of wonders: miles of open water traversed in an instant as the disciples gratefully receive what is before them.

This often forgotten third miracle -- after the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water -- reinforces a larger idea. *We're already here.* This is it. The day before us is ordinary, and may also be supremely extraordinary. Today could be a day of revolution and miracle because of its mundane ordinariness. High drama and deep peace are always accessible to us in each human moment.

Our passage reminds us that real conflict is not reserved to battlefields or Shakespearean plot twists. The miracle of finding peace or satisfaction to our hunger need not come in some extraordinary moment. It can come now, in a bit of bread, or in the calming greeting that transforms a threat into a friend.

Conflict may be unavoidable. But likewise, peace is also available from what is already at hand -- when and if we convince ourselves that a simple, eucharistic act of sharing what we gratefully receive can be enough for today.

Response

What conflict (great or small; revolutionary or mundane) is before us today?

What extraordinary ordinary person are we likely to encounter, and can we meet them with miraculous gratitude for what they bring to our shared life?

How might we respond to the real dramas playing out within neighbourhood squabbles, family tensions and our internal disputes without expecting a miracle to come in some extraordinary form? Can we imagine that the miracle of gratitude for what each person brings might transform what we have and where we are into enough to get us through?

Prayer

God of this moment,
you are here with us,
in this storm,
in the crowd of many needs,
in the reality of our conflicts.
And so
this is a moment to
expect miracles.
May we gratefully receive
what this day brings,
what each encounter offers,
what conflict reveals to us,
to find
our fears calmed,
our hungers filled,
and our conflicts transformed
into moments
of lasting communion.
Amen.