

The Lord Is Good to All
Matthew 14:13-21, Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21

Three mice died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked them how they liked being in heaven. The mice said that it was OK, but since they have such short legs it was hard for them to get around because heaven was so big. So St. Peter told them that he thought he would be able to help them. After a little while, an angel came to the mice and gave each of them a set of roller skates. Right away, the mice put on the roller skates, and they could zip around heaven and really enjoy themselves.

A little later, a cat died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked the cat how he liked being in heaven. The cat answered, "Oh, boy, do I like being in heaven! I'm having a great time and I'm really enjoying myself. And most of all, I love the meals on wheels."

The Gospel talks about Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes for 5000 plus people on the hillside. Imagine trying to feed that many people by gathering food from everyone there and then passing it around again. You almost have to imagine a first century meal on wheels, with the disciples on inline skates speeding up and down the aisles through the crowd. There are a lot of different lessons that you can draw from this story.

Sometimes people focus on the disciples, and how they looked to Jesus to take care of the problem without initially getting involved themselves. Sometimes people focus on the miracle, on the fact that so little food feeds so many people. As I was reading this story combined with our Psalm reading, what struck me was that Jesus has mercy, Jesus has compassion on the crowd. Not just on some of them, but on all of them.

Some point out that there was no miracle involved here, but that the people in the crowd all had brought lunches with them in their pockets. When they saw the disciples starting to pass out the meager fare they brought out their lunches and shared with one another. Even if that's true, it's a miracle anyway. Song-writer Jerry Fuller tells this true story.

After years of hard work and saving, the day came for Reb and Jackie to open their own restaurant. All they needed was the final health inspection and the issuing of their business permit. That was going to happen first thing in the morning, and then *Our Place* as they called the restaurant would be in business.

That morning Hurricane Hugo hit, and came inland 200 miles to their North Carolina town. Trees were uprooted, power lines were down, homes and stores were destroyed. Reb and Jackie ran to their restaurant. Whew! Everything was intact.

A deputy sheriff pulled up and told them that their restaurant, the fire station next door and a service station down the road were the only ones in town that had electricity. Reb and Jackie called the health inspector to come immediately so they could open, but because of the power outage, the inspector couldn't get into his office to issue the permit, and because of the hurricane it would be several days until he could do so. Understandably, other things had to come first. No permit, no business opening.

Reb and Jackie had a refrigerator stocked with 300 pounds of bacon and beef and lettuce, and bushels of tomatoes and loaves of bread, none of which would be fresh and most of which would be unfit to serve by the time the inspection had come through. There was only one thing to do: give the food away.

They said to the deputy, "Tell your coworkers and other emergency people you see that we'll have free BLT's and coffee for anybody who want to drop by." As Jerome will tell you, free bacon and emergency services personnel are a good match. Soon firefighters, police officers, utility line crews and other workers were filing into *Our Place*. When Reb and Jackie heard that another restaurant was scalping people by charging ten dollars for two eggs, toast and bacon, they put a sign in the window: FREE BLTS—FREE COFFEE. Families, travelers, and street people were welcomed.

Then something began to happen. People started to clean counters and sweep floors. Volunteers took over the dish washing from Jackie and helped Reb at the grill. Hearing about what was going on at *Our Place* from the local radio station, people from a neighboring town that had not been as badly hit by the storm brought food from their freezers. Stores and dairies sent over chicken, milk, and foods of all kinds.

And so the long day went. Those first cups of coffee and BLTs somehow stretched to 16,000 meals. The restaurant's small stock increased by 500 loaves of bread, cases of mayonnaise, 350 pots of coffee and bushels of produce.

Maybe that's really what happened with Jesus and the loaves and the fishes. Maybe people did find ways to help and share. Maybe they didn't and it was all on Jesus. Either way, it was a miracle.

Jesus had just before this story learned of the death of his friend, John the Baptist. He had wanted to retire to a quiet place to mourn, but the crowds followed him – and they stayed so long that he had to feed them. And as he involved himself compassionately in feeding the crowds Jesus dealt with his grief. It's true for us, too. We often feel better, whether we are grief-stricken or in whatever way focusing on ourselves, when we reach out, when we go out to others.

I'm sure Jesus didn't refuse anyone in that crowd from eating. Jesus didn't exclude anyone. There were no literacy tests, there was no creed or faith statement to memorize, no background checks or credit checks. Anyone who needed food, got food. Good people got food, and people who did a lot of bad things got food.

Many years ago there was a woman who lived in a small village in France. Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and needy. After many years of kind and selfless service to the village's families the woman died. She had no family of her own, so the townsfolk planned a beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman to whom so many owed their lives.

The parish priest, however, pointed out that, because she was a Protestant, she could not be buried in the town's Catholic cemetery. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for the priest either, because he too had been cared for by the woman during a serious illness. But the canons of the Church were very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence of the cemetery.

The day of the funeral arrived, and the whole village accompanied the woman's casket to the cemetery, where she was buried – outside the fence. That night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the cemetery. They quietly began their work – not moving the coffin, but moving the fence.

In some ways maybe a greater miracle than Jesus' feeding of the crowds with a few pieces of bread and fish is Jesus' transforming the crowd into a community, a community united in their need for one another, in the bread they share, in the love of Christ who has brought them together. Christ empowers each one of us to perform our own miracles of creating community when we "move the fences" to include outsiders, when we welcome the rejected and forgotten to our tables, when we give of what little we have, joyfully and gratefully, for the sake of others, when we welcome one another as we would welcome Jesus.

You may have heard of Dorothy Day, a Catholic worker for social justice in the mid 1900's. She had started a newspaper to take up the cause of the poor, and she had very little in the way of finances. But her persuasive friend Pete Maurin had convinced her that with God's help whatever Dorothy had would be sufficient. Dorothy's newspaper staff often were upset by her taking money intended for their rent or for paper and supplies and spending that needed money for food for the homeless people, who, in the eyes of the staff, were always cluttering up the apartment where they worked.

Several times, when it looked as if the paper would not have the funds to go on because Dorothy had spent the money on the poor, a person would turn up to offer them a gift. It was always just enough to meet the current crisis. Each time Dorothy taught the staff a lesson that is hard for us to learn – the lesson that Christ was sufficient to meet their needs.

It's not about who deserves help; it's about who needs help. It's not about figuring out who the deserving needy are. It's about recognizing the needy, and that it's not our call whether they are deserving or not. Sometimes people ask why bad things happen to good people. The answer is that it's for the same reason good things happen to bad people. We don't know who the good people are. We don't know who the bad people are. We don't know who's deserving and who's not.

What we do know is that we are called to share and serve, without question or hesitation. What we do know is that God will supply our need. What we do know is that through us, God is good to all. Amen.

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