

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 9th Sunday After Pentecost, July 26, 2015

Two Sardines? You Must Be Kidding!

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July 26, 2015

John 6:1-15

The suggested Gospel reading for this morning is John 6:1-21 but I have ended the reading with verse 15. The suggested reading describes two of Jesus' miracles, the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. That is fodder for two sermons, not one, so I omitted the miracle of walking on water saving it for a possible future message.

The feeding of the five thousand is a story we all know but do we really understand its message? Certainly it is a story about Christ's compassion for the hungry but it is also a story of how easy it was for the disciples to underestimate Jesus' power.

The disciples were astonished when Jesus told them to feed this huge crowd. Philip responded by saying that it was impossible. They didn't have enough money to buy that much food. It would take six months wages or more to do that. It would have cost 200 denari and, as you may recall from one of my earlier sermons, one denarius was the typical daily wage of a worker at that time. That was an incredible amount of money to suddenly come up with. It was impossible to do.

Then Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, brought a boy to Jesus. The boy had five barley loaves and two fish. Andrew suggested that this meager amount of food might help. It is a wonder that the other disciples didn't break out in laughter, and perhaps they did. We really don't know.

What were these five barley loaves and two fish? Were they large in size? Hardly. Wheat was the grain for the bread of the middle class and the wealthy. The poor couldn't afford wheat bread. They made their bread in small loaves, like pita bread, and they made it of barley. Barley was the food of the poor. It was low in nutritional value, had a less desirable taste than wheat bread, and was less digestible. Philo wrote that barley was *"suited for irrational animals and people in unhappy circumstances."*

So the bread wasn't much. What about the fish? They weren't much either. They probably were no bigger than sardines. The Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberius as it

is also called in our reading, swarmed with small sardine-like fish which typically were caught and dried or pickled to preserve them. This was undoubtedly what the boy had -- two dried or pickled sardines and five small pita-type loaves of nearly indigestible bread. How could five thousand people be fed with this meager amount of food?

Jesus told everyone to sit down and, as a father would have done at a family meal, he took the loaves and the two tiny fish and blessed them, possibly using the common Jewish thanksgiving prayer, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." The food was distributed and everyone ate their fill.

Jesus then told his disciples to gather up any fragments of bread or fish which were left over as this was the custom at Jewish feasts. Anything left over which was the size of an olive or larger would be gathered so that it would not go to waste. These leftovers would traditionally be used to feed those who served the meal and others who were very poor. It was customary at the time to always leave a small part of the meal, the Peah as it was called, for this purpose.

The astonishing thing was that starting out with five small loaves and two sardines, twelve baskets of food were collected. No Jew ever travelled without a bottle shaped basket to carry his own food in order to be able to observe the Jewish dietary rules of cleanliness so we can assume that the twelve baskets were those of the twelve disciples.

How can this miracle be explained? I don't think that Jesus just snapped his fingers like the Wizard of Id in the comic strips would do and a huge amount of food appeared out of nowhere. One explanation which I favor is that Jesus didn't change the loaves and the fishes into a mountain of food, but rather changed a crowd of selfish people into a sharing fellowship.

Why do I think that was the case? It had been a nine mile walk for the people to have walked around the lake to catch up to Jesus. That was a long distance to go and people would likely have supplies with them for the trip. They would have wanted to keep what they had for themselves but then a young boy gave up what he had and Jesus thanked God for it and shared it. As William Barclay suggests in his study of The Gospel of John, "... moved by ... [the boy's] example, everyone who had anything did the same; and in the end there was enough, and more than enough, for all."

That was the miracle --- changing people, not changing the bread and the fish.

Our Daily Bread (March 8, 2001) commented on our scripture reading with these words:

“Skeptical about the usefulness of a small lunch, Andrew said to Jesus, ‘What are [these five loaves and two fish] among so many?’ Yet the little lunch in the hands of Jesus turned out to be a huge blessing. So, before you think you don’t have much to offer Jesus, consider this [story];

“Edward Kimball, a Sunday school teacher in Boston, decided to visit a young man in his class to be sure he was a Christian. That day he led that man, Dwight L. Moody to the Lord.

“Moody ... had a major impact on Wilbur Chapman ... a prominent evangelist ... [who] recruited Billy Sunday to join his evangelistic campaigns. In turn, Sunday launched a national ministry ... An organization that started as a result of Sunday’s revival invited evangelist Mordecai Ham to Charlotte. In one of those meetings, Billy Graham received Christ as his Savior and later became the most prominent evangelist of our time

“...God has a special way of using routine faithfulness in the ‘small things’ to accomplish great things.”

The small things you do to spread the faith, or the things you do to help the needy by unselfishly giving what you are able to give, like the boy with the five barley loaves and the two small fish, grow and expand.

What may seem insignificant, or routine, or small is often used by God to show his power over everything. God uses small things to accomplish great things for his glory.

Remember that whenever you are hesitant to do something for the Lord or to give a bit more to help those in need. The boy with the five loaves and the two sardines, with the help of Christ did great things, and so can you.

Amen.