



The Inclusive Community

Eighteenth Sunday Ordinary Time

July 31, 2011

Matthew 14: 13-21

Theme: Community

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

This is an unnecessary miracle – multiplying bread so people do not go hungry. Jesus has taught them through the day. He has nothing else to teach them that day. People are free to go.

The crowds are in a deserted place, it is true. But not so deserted that they cannot easily get to nearby villages where food may be purchased. In any case, they are not starving. Jewish peasants would not head out for the day without some food for lunch at least and maybe even supper. No one is starving.

So this is a miracle about something relatively trivial. The crowd is not restive. The disciples are anxious and, perhaps, tired. This is a large crowd. It has been a long day. They would like things to end.

So, is Jesus performing a miracle to give people an early supper? Or to make the disciples less eager to end the day?

Or is the whole event not about a miracle at all.

The passage does not end, as miracle stories often do, with descriptions of awe and with shouts of acclamations for Jesus. Matthew tells us the crowd ate and then went home. It seems so anti-climactic. We, later readers of the text, get more excited about the miracle than the crowds do.

So what is going on here?

Matthew gives us a clue. Jesus had compassion on the crowd and cured their sick. He does not teach anything, at least in Matthew (Mark has him teaching in his version of the story but Matthew does not).

This is a compassion story and not a miracle story. Compassion is often associated with caring for people in their extreme distress. More often it is associated with caring for them in their ordinary concerns. A marriage or friendship works because there is compassion for all the hundreds of relatively trivial experiences that upset us. We cannot save our compassion for the major problems because, by the time we get to them, the relationship will be over because we were not there for all the lesser discomforts our partner encountered.

We cannot build a community by focusing on major events. That is a movement, not a community. A community is where you go when you are tired or confused or lonesome. We go to community when we are dealing with a major problem because it was there for all our lesser problems.

So Jesus is addressing the crowd that came out to see him by offering them food to eat before they go home. It is not what a Messiah should do. Messiahs are supposed to be for major events. This Messiah is there for minor ones too.

The compassion is put in the context of Eucharist or Communion. Matthew says there were five loaves and two fish. The fish became a symbol for the Christian community but it is not a Eucharistic symbol. Bread is. So Matthew notes the fish but focuses on the bread. Jesus "blessed and broke the loaves and gave them." These are Eucharistic descriptions and actions.

The Eucharist is not meant for major events in our lives. It is for everyday concerns. It is our daily bread. The people with whom we share our daily bread are those we turn to in our major problems.

People come to our side when we suffer a significant loss and an overwhelming problem. But who is there, with compassion, for our daily problems? To whom do we talk about our relatively trivial concerns? It is the people we love most and the community we treasure most.

We see Jesus here concerned about the ordinary ways we put our lives together. In the Lord's Prayer, we start with God and heaven, with kingdom and the divine will. But Jesus shifts the prayer quickly and we pray for the daily bread we need daily and for forgiveness for the stupid and selfish things we sometimes do.

So Jesus is in a deserted place, not far from nearby villages. And he gives people their daily bread and he eats with them before they go home. He cures the sick but most of the crowd is not sick. He feeds the hungry; all of the crowd was hungry. He cares for us even when our needs seem trivial compared to massive Messianic concerns. The community of Jesus is not built around the cross or Easter. These are major events. It is built around a table and bread broken and shared. It is a family meal when we are hungry. So simple, so awesome. Only a truly compassionate Messiah would lead us there rather than to a creed or a proclamation or massive public protest.

We do not cure people or care for them until we make them part of a community where they can come when they are relatively well but hungry for companionship, community and compassion.

The church is represented by the twelve baskets at the end of this story, the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. It is all rather Messianic. More important is the focus on a table so large and inclusive, that we have to count the women and children. Mark did not count them. Matthew includes them. Matthew is the Gospel most focused on the church.

Jesus watches the crowd go home and goes to a nearby boat with his disciples. Matthew says that Jesus dismissed the crowds, like a host at the door after dinner.

Jesus is tired and so are the disciples. This too matters. It is time to have quiet and rest.

The miracle in this story is not in the multiplication of bread and fish but in the kind of Messiah and the kind of God Jesus proclaims. The miracle in this story is the eating together around a table, however the food got there. The miracle in the story is that this is an ordinary miracle, so to speak, a miracle we can all do. All we need is a table and bread and an open heart and a compassionate spirit. The church is not centered in Rome or Constantinople or Geneva. It is focused on our family table, our community meals together, on the bread we all need and on the comfort we can be for one another.