

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller  
The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost  
26 July 2015

Scripture readings:

2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 11:1-15

Psalms 14

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

During the week I was speaking with two Methodist pastors with whom I was out to dinner. Guess who? I hadn't yet read the lessons so I inquired of them what the texts for today were. And I said, "*Of course you know what my read on the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes is. You know what I think about that miracle.*" And they agreed. You have me second-guessed on this one too, don't you? How did that happen?

Nobody travels that far to hear anybody, I don't care how good they are, without taking something to eat. Even *we* have coffee hour afterwards, right? Everybody brought enough for him or her self, but the only one who was willing to offer what he had to share was the little boy with five loaves and two fishes, and I think they were all embarrassed, not only to tears but to share, and they did! And there was not only enough to eat but there were leftovers - leftovers in twelve baskets! Do you suppose there is a suggestion there that the gift of the bread of life was for the twelve tribes of Israel?

The older I get the more I think about this extraordinary, wonderful story I'm moved to think more about the little boy himself and what he represents and symbolizes in this text. He was a kid. Kids don't count for much at all. He wasn't old enough to own property. He certainly had no money in the bank. He wasn't old enough to have wisdom. I mean he was foolish enough to think that if he offered what was in his lunch pail it might make a difference. He was willing to take a risk that nobody else was willing to take. He was willing to share at the risk in the midst of five thousand people that he would end up with nothing. If his lunch were shared what would be left for him among five thousand? He certainly wasn't reasonable. He couldn't vote. He was probably even too young to carry a gun. He ran the risk of being laughed at. He was not counted sometimes in biblical accounts of things. Sometimes we're told, "*And they counted women and children*" so he may not have been included in the number.

But there was a problem about which he knew and he said, "*This is all that I have but you may have it.*" And in that act of believing - and I'm not even going to say believing in Jesus - believing that the little that he had could, in fact, make a difference - that's what he believed. Jesus blessed him in that and took what he offered and blessed what he offered, and a very little bit became a whole lot. A very small lunch became a banquet for thousands.

Now I think what we miss in this story is the information which comes to us about the importance of those we de-value who have little and whom we see as dependent, intruders, costly, laughable, and worthless. And we do see others like that from time to time. At this extraordinary moment in our country we even hear candidates for the presidency of the United States talking about Mexicans as if they were little boys with nothing to offer. Yes, I'm going to say the name: Donald Trump. *[laughter]*

Now unlike Donald Trump, I have lived, not for long periods of time, but I *have* lived in Mexico. I was never once raped. I never once saw a gun. I remember being ill, sicker than I have ever been in my life before or since. You know about *Montezuma's Revenge*? *[laughter]* I remember lying on my cot and putting my head on my arm and feeling the heat before they ever touched, radiating. There was an unknown person in the rooming house where I lived who fed me and cared for me and brought me back to health - for no other reason than that is what I needed.

We are invited to think about others in this day as people thought about that boy in Jesus' day - unnecessary, not worth counting, funny, having nothing and bringing nothing to the table but a pitiful five loaves and two fish. And it was that little boy's example that made the miracle of changing human hearts possible. It had nothing to do with magic. It had nothing to do with economics. It had nothing to do with politics. It had to do with the normal condition of the human heart which is jealous, selfish, frightened and hateful, ignorant and cruel and egocentric.

It used to be a custom in the German churches in northern New Jersey where my first parish was to write around the top of the baptismal font, "*Lasset die Kindlein zu mir kommen*" - "*Suffer, let, permit the little children to come unto me,*" because of course in our traditions we baptize infants. There are other Christian traditions which scratch their heads at us and say, "*Why would you do that? They don't know what they're doing. They're not making a faithful decision. They're not deciding to become a part of the community of faith. They're not of age.*" Well, that's all true, and that's a discussion that we can always have in the church. I think the churches at that time would provide confirmation as a way for that to happen, but whatever your opinion, in infant baptism we believe, teach and confess that children have value and even an infant that is capable of doing nothing but making demands and soiling itself is, in fact, a child of God and has value in the sight of God despite its inability to think, perform useful functions, earn a salary or do anything other than depend upon parents for its existence. In baptism we say, "*This child is valuable to God and, therefore, needs to be valuable to the rest of us and to the world.*"

The child in the story believes that the little he has can be helpful. Now there is no explanation of how he believes that or what he thinks is going to happen, and I don't think the kid knew or thought about it himself beyond the fact that he thought, "*I've got something that is needed here.*" He didn't think in terms of five thousand hungry adult guts. He didn't think in terms of the possibility that he himself would not have lunch. He only saw the problem and offered the little that he had in hopes that it would be helpful and help to solve the problem.

Jesus blesses him and what he offers and the problem is solved and we call that a miracle. And then we proceed to build walls between us and poor people whom we marginalize, exclude, laugh at, accuse. Now when I'm speaking politically about our nation and Mexico, obviously I feel the need to remind you that it's corn-on-the-cob season. Have you had any good corn-on-the-cob yet? Remember that came to us from the indigenous American people. It's not a Pennsylvania Dutch dish. That came from the people who were here before we stole the property - our ancestors. For those who feed the world with that gorgeous golden gift that we particularly savor at this time of year, we are handed perhaps symbolically an ear of corn, one ear - thousands of kernels on it. A gift from a poor person who when blessed by God - the person and the gift - become what we call a miracle. It turns not only into wealth and satisfaction and possibility, but we stray close to gluttony. Afterwards there are twelve baskets left over. One would be enough for a miracle, right? Twelve for the whole people of Israel, for the whole world. There is enough. But the lesson about trusting in the business of sharing is an embarrassing one when it comes to us in the gospel because it's taught not even by Jesus. It's taught by a kid who had excluded from his mind or his heart the possibility that the very little bit that he had can indeed make a difference. He refuses to negate its value. He refuses to negate its possibility. He refuses to accept what the world is saying to him with sandwiches up their sleeves. And he offers all that he has with hope.

I'm proud of *The Lutheran* magazine this month. The lead article is always written by someone named Peter Marty. You probably have heard of his father, Martin Marty, a great Lutheran theologian. It's just a simple one-page article about justice, but it's the sub-title that moved me to read it. "*Justice: Jesus more interested in providing what people need, not deserve.*" As the Church, as Jesus' people, as little Christs, isn't

the lesson today encouragement for us to worry about what people need way more than what people deserve? He talks about biblical language. There are two Hebrew words which Peter makes very clear - one for doing righteousness and one for justice - two different concepts. Jesus is worried about righteousness, about how we are right in terms of the resources of the world and those who live in the world and how they're shared.

*"I have chosen him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice."* (Genesis 18:19) Two different things. It includes an understanding and appreciation of the Law. It also includes an understanding and appreciation of how we meet the needs of others with the little bit that we have.

Now if you agree with me on the little bit that we have, I must be forced to accuse us of being hypocrites because, friends, as you know, we are the wealthiest people in the world. We are the ones with the baloney sandwiches up our sleeves. It is we who have not traveled unwisely, without making provision for our journey. It is we who are the *haves* and maybe rather than beating up the *have-nots* who come often to help drive our economy, we ought to be asking about what the needs of the world are - and not just those on the border between Texas and Mexico, for God's sake. But what the needs of the world are and how it is that we might become again a little boy rather than a hypocritical adult sitting on a hillside somewhere where Jesus, I believe, has told us to sit down and wait for somebody else to go to the supermarket and feed us. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.