

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost  
2 Sam. 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Eph. 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

## Multiplying Grace\*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng  
Church of the Transfiguration  
July 26, 2015

I've never had a meal with 5,000 people before. I've been at some pretty large wedding banquets – but certainly not with 5,000 people. And if you know anything about Asian American family reunions, it can seem like there are thousands and thousands of uncles, aunties, and cousins everywhere! But there actually aren't, of course.

The closest experience that I've had to today's gospel passage on the multiplication of loaves and fishes occurred just a few weeks ago, when I attended the daily eucharists at the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Salt Lake City.

The General Convention, for those of you who may not be familiar with it, is the governing body of the Episcopal Church that has met every three years (more or less) since 1785. This year, our General Convention took a number of historic actions, including the election of Bishop Michael Curry of North Carolina as our first African American presiding bishop. General Convention also changed the marriage canons and liturgy to allow for sacramental marriage equality everywhere in the Episcopal Church.

Each day at 9:30 am, the 900 deputies and 300 bishops would gather with thousands of other visitors in a huge convention center hall that seated close to 5,000 people. Like Jesus and his followers in today's gospel reading, we would break bread together on an enormous scale: 144 Eucharistic ministers at 12 stations, 40 deacons, six vergers, a dozen altar guild members, 96 loaves of bread, and one and a half cases of port.

Just about everything at these shared eucharistic meals was on a huge scale!

Now upon first glance, it seems that today's gospel reading from John about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was similarly on a huge scale. After all, Jesus feeds 5,000 people, and ends up with twelve baskets of bread left over!

But upon closer examination, today's lesson is actually not so much about the large things, but rather the small. Although the miracle of the loaves and fishes appears in all four gospels, there are actually a number of interesting details about the small things that only appear in John's version – and not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

Did you notice, for example, the source of the five loaves and two fish? John tells us that the apostle Andrew brings forward a boy, who is only mentioned in the fourth gospel. Andrew says to Jesus: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

---

\* Copyright © 2015 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

It's easy to overlook these sentences, and you might not have paid much attention even if you did notice them. However, the specific details in John's gospel – details that are hidden in the English translation – actually demonstrate how important the small things are to God.

First, the Greek word that John uses for the boy is *paidarion*. Gramatically speaking, *paidarion* is the diminutive form of the word “boy.” Thus, the person that Andrew introduces to Jesus is not just a boy, or *pais*, but a little boy.

Second, the little boy's loaves are described as barley, or *krithinos*. Barley loaves were the food of the poor. They were looked down upon as much less appetizing than, say, wheat bread. In fact, barley was used to feed horses and mules. Thus, the barley loaves were also small, both physically and metaphorically.

Third, the word used by John to describe the fish is not the regular Greek word for fish, or *ichthus*, but rather *opsarion*. *Opsarion* actually refers to small dried or pickled fish – a relish of sorts to help the unappetizing barley loaves go down. Thus, the fish were also small.

The more I reflected upon today's gospel passage, the more I wondered about the little boy's story. Where did he come from? Was he bringing food home for his family? Or was he a vendor, selling the food to the crowd?

What exactly did the apostle Andrew say to the little boy to get him to give up his loaves and fishes? Did the little boy think that he might get into trouble with his family for doing so?

Was the little boy a person of incredible faith – more so than the apostle Phillip, who pointed out that it would cost more than a half year's salary to feed everyone who was gathered?

And what ever became of this little boy as the Jesus movement spread and the early church grew?

For me, an important lesson of today's gospel story is that what might seem small to us is actually large in God's sight.

How many of us at various times in our life have felt insignificant or small – like a little child, or barley loaves, or dried fish? How many times have we felt that our gifts and talents are unappetizing, and that we have nothing of value to offer to God or to others?

And yet, it is precisely our unique time, talent, and treasure that God needs to build up the Kingdom of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, God can “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

Like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge mustard tree, today's gospel passage shows us how God can take what might seem small or insignificant to us, and use it as a means for ushering in the Kingdom of God.

The flip side, of course, is that the things that appear large and important might actually not be of God. In today's Hebrew Bible reading, for example, we hear about the great King David and how he not only commits adultery with Bathsheba, but he sends her husband Uriah off to war so that he can be killed in battle. Power corrupts, even in the case of a humble shepherd boy who became the King of Israel. Sometimes bigger is not always better.

In just a few moments, Bishop Andrew will baptize Crosby John Clegg and welcome him into the Body of Christ. Like our nameless protagonist in today's Gospel, Crosby may be little in size, but he is the means by which God will carry out the miracle of multiplying grace for multitudes of people.

As you promise to do all in your power to support Crosby in his life in Christ, I invite you to reflect upon your own gifts – gifts that, at times, might seem like nothing more than small barley loaves or dried fish – and see how they are exactly what God needs to build up God's Kingdom, right here and right now.

The apostle Andrew asked the following question in today's gospel passage: "But what are these loaves and fishes among so many people?" The answer is: Everything, with God's help. Everything.