

Things are getting bad for Jesus. In my bible, two sections before today's passage is labeled "Rejection at Nazareth." Even his own townsfolk have turned away from him. So Jesus turns his attention to his disciples - the ones who are the seed of his future Church. But things go from bad to worse - the section before today's passage is labeled "the Death of John the Baptist." Jesus withdraws to a lonely place to figure out what to do next - he has a lot of praying to do! But when he arrives at the deserted place where he intended to be alone, he is met by a large and needy crowd. Of course, he responds to them with the only miracle of Jesus that's recorded in all four Gospels.

If I was one of the overworked and troubled disciples, I would have suggested that he "dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." Makes perfect sense - a good management decision. I would have been frustrated with Jesus when his answer to the problem was: "...give them some food yourselves."

I share that day's frustration of the disciples. I feel frustrated and overwhelmed when I look out at the world in which we live - even my little corner of this covid-infested and hyper-political world. I want to throw my hands up and just take care of my own little life, as best I can.

The disciples don't have much with them, but they have some food. In Matthew's version of the story, there is no boy to provide the loaves and fishes for this miracle. Jesus is asking them to share out of their own supplies. And they do. Maybe part of the miracle is the change in attitude of the disciples.

But I know what I hear in this gospel: Jesus took a little bit of fish and bread. Before he did anything, he said the blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to give to the crowds. And there was more than enough.

This Gospel tells me that I've got to stop making excuses and get busy working with whatever I've been given - the way Jesus did with the loaves and fishes he was given that day. I learn from him to give thanks to God for what I have that might be useful in helping others. And then, I have to do something.

Did you notice that Jesus gave the blessed food to the disciples to distribute, instead of giving them to the crowds himself? The disciples distributed the food blessed by Jesus, and if you look at the sequence of events, the loaves and fishes must have multiplied themselves in the hands of the disciples. I think this miracle showed them that whatever they have, it will be more than enough, if they work with Jesus.

As his disciple, I learn from this detail that I should work with what I have, and work with other disciples. Together we're better able to attend to the needs of others that would otherwise leave us, as individuals, overwhelmed. All in all - we do better working together as a church, each using our talents where they are best utilized. So maybe Jesus is telling us today to get back to our involvement as a church community.

Tom and Rita always need help with our support for the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Nora is struggling with the need for liturgical ministers to help at our Masses. Chris is trying to figure out how to keep our Parish School of Religion going through the uncertainty of these times. And that's just in our little parish world. There is plenty for us to do in our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools and our workplaces. Jesus tells us to do what we can, even though it feels puny to us and appears insignificant by the world's standards of measurement.

The disciples in the Gospel experience that same helplessness; so many hungry and so little to give them. Yet, Jesus urges, "give them something to eat yourselves."

We all do have something to give, the gift of our presence, as meager as that feels. And in giving of ourselves, we become the "true presence" of Christ to others. Aren't we being challenged to look into our own resources, as insignificant as they may seem, and maybe take a risk for "the crowd?"

A lot of banquet imagery is swirling around in the today's readings. The feeding of the five thousand points back to the Old Testament including the banquet that Isaiah describes where God will feed the multitudes. It's a call from God to the people of Israel to come to this banquet that isn't ordinary food and drink - it's supernatural food. Isaiah's promises are fulfilled in Jesus and his Church. All who are thirsty come to the living waters of Baptism, and then the hungry are given supernatural food at the Eucharistic banquet, which we celebrate here today. And in our second reading, Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

The feeding of the five thousand points forward to the Last Supper. Matthew wants us to see this miracle as a sign of the Eucharist. Jesus performs the same actions in the same sequence as at the Last Supper, and today Fr. Paul does the same.

Many of you have probably not noticed that Fr. Paul's chalice has the two fishes and the five loaves on its stem. I always see this reminder because I am blessed to be able to elevate the chalice at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. I hope Fr. Paul's chalice and today's readings serve as a reminder to work with whatever we've been given. To work with Jesus to do what we can in our world.

Amen?

- Deacon Jack Schaefer