

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 11, 2018, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church – Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Rector

Scripture: John 6:1-15

“Multiplication by Faith”

Today's Holy Gospel is the second time John has told us of something happening at Passover time; the first time was when Jesus was in Jerusalem, He took a chord and made a whip and cleared the Temple of the traders and the moneychangers. There will be a third time, when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the last time that we will remember in two weeks, on Palm Sunday – when we recall the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – riding on the back of a colt of a donkey. They say, “*Hosanna on the Highest*” and they proclaim Him King. That is the beginning of Holy Week. John wants us to understand, and draws our attention to the fact that the extraordinary feeding of the crowds took place at Passover time, connecting it in our minds both with the first Passover itself—the time when God liberated the children of Israel from Egypt, and then led them through the wilderness to the promised land—and with the other Passover events in the Gospel. The ‘cleansing of the Temple’ and Jesus’ death and resurrection on the other.

The fact that God fed the children of Israel, during their wilderness wanderings, with a special kind of bread – a ‘bread from heaven’ which we can read in Exodus 16, where the ‘manna’ is provided daily by God because the people are grumbling and complaining. They were thinking of being back in Egypt eating leaks and onions by the Nile. Really? In slavery? Really? God gave them manna in the morning and quail in the evening. Today's Holy Gospel, gives us the account of Jesus' own provision of food for a large crowd out in the wilderness area, across the sea of Galilee and away from towns where food might have been found. There was no Flash Foods, no Harvey's, no Walmart, Lord knows there was no Publix - just like Douglas! It was quite a remote area – but Jesus stepped up. Remarkably, later in this sixth chapter of John's Gospel there is a long discussion of ‘the bread from heaven.’

It is important to note that all of the four Gospel tell of this account in remarkable detail. They are so detailed that they must have come from people who were there as eyewitnesses. John, who wrote this Gospel was the beloved apostle – an eyewitness. Matthew was the tax collector, Luke was not an eyewitness, but he was given the account by his dear friend, the Apostle Paul, Mark was a friend of Peter's. His name was John Mark and his account of Jesus' life comes from Peter. This is no made up story – about sharing and caring! I went to a church once and there was a visiting priest and he preached that this was not a miracle – if anything it was a ‘miracle of the sharing!’ This young boy took his lunch out and shared it, and everyone took out their lunch and shared it with one another. NO! NO! I preached about this before here at St. Andrew's. My daughter Theresa, in about 2002 when we were in seminary, so she was about 9 or 10, and she is sitting listening to this preacher. I was doing a favor for a friend and leading the music – playing the guitar, while Theresa is listening with her mom and brother. When the priest said this was not a miracle by Jesus but instead a miracle of sharing – Theresa proclaimed loudly “that's not what happened!” I think everyone there probably thought ‘thank God she said that’ because they were thinking that too. Where do they get this stuff from? It is

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not from the Bible. The Bible says that Jesus said a prayer and all of a sudden people were fed. This is about the power of Jesus and His ministry and the ministry of His followers.

It was spring time, the time of the Passover was near, because we are told that there was plenty of grass – and that only happens in the spring time when there is rain and the melting of the snow peaks in the mountains. It is kind of lush – a nice hillside.

Jesus asks Philip as a test because He knew exactly what He had in store for them “*Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*” (John 6:5) “*Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, (St. Andrew) Simon Peter's brother, spoke up.*” (John 6:7-8) St. Andrew was inspired to find a young boy who would provide just what Jesus needed. Andrew brought the boy to Jesus and said: “*Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?*” (John 6:9) Andrew and Philip knew that they had no solution to the problem, but they knew to bring what is available to Jesus’ attention. You can never tell what He’s going to do with it—and part of Christian faith is the expectation that Jesus will do something we hadn’t thought of, something new and creative – and probably spectacular. The reaction of the people—and the response of Jesus to their reaction – are both very telling.

Jesus instructed the Apostles to have the people sit down. There was about five thousand men, a pretty huge crowd by any standards, but that did not include women and children, who were probably grouped separately for the meal according to Jewish custom. The number was probably at least doubled and maybe tripled! Can you imagine the numbers there on that hillside?

Jesus spoke the customary Jewish blessing over the loaves and the fish – giving thanks. He most probably said “*Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth*” Jesus wanted the people to see that the object of the blessing was not the food, but God who gave it. Jesus looked up to heaven, in dependence on the Father for a miraculous provision of food. Then He broke the loaves into pieces, and then divided the fish into portions, and gave, which in the Greek imperfect tense used said “kept giving”, the portions to His disciples to them give to the people. How the miracle itself took place is not stated, but the tense of the verb “gave” would indicate that the bread multiplied in Jesus’ hands. The correlation to the Israelites in the wilderness is so important because once again God is providing the bread to His people – in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – the long-promised Messiah. Like the manna in the wilderness, God provided much more than they needed – so much that they had as much as they wanted – and you know how people can be when there is “free food!” Did you ever watch that? Have you ever gone to a luncheon someplace and the food is free - and the plates aren’t big enough?

The people were apparently astonished because the supply never ran out – and there were 12 baskets full of leftovers. John puts it this way: “*After the people saw the miraculous sign that*

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Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." (John 6:14-15) By the way – this took place at the sight called Tabgha – on the Sea of Galilee – then the mountain that Jesus withdrew to, right behind it, would become known as the Mount of Beatitudes. But wait – this site where Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes would also serve bread and fish when the Risen Jesus appeared to the Apostles in John Chapter 21. Jesus asked them, "*Children, have you caught anything?*" They had been out all night and caught nothing. Jesus told them to go back put and put their nets out on the other side. That is a whole 'nother Gospel for another day. God loves to use the same place to remind His people of His power and presence. Israel was not a very big country and if you remember 2 weeks ago we spoke about Mount Moriah – the place where Abraham took Isaac also became the Temple Mount years later; the same mountain where on the side of it Jesus carried His cross. God loves to use the same place to remind His people of His power and presence.

Jesus' Apostles and disciples learned some important lessons on that day, during the second year of Jesus' ministry. They learned that spiritual responsibility is never limited by human ability. Our every breath is a gift from God – and this teaches us to depend totally upon Him.

In this situation – even though there was just a small amount of food; five small barley loaves and two small pickled fish – God was there. Jesus accepted the gift from this young man that Andrew presented, and He multiplied it more than five thousand-fold. We can learn from this that if we give to God all that we are and have – our time, our talents, our prayers or possessions – He will make them go further than we would have ever thought possible.

What Jesus did that day formed the wonders that would take place recorded in the rest of John's sixth chapter; Jesus walking on the water, and Jesus proclaiming that "*I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*" (John 6:47-51) Only Jesus can fill us with more than we could possibly imagine.

Let me close with a question: If you were Andrew – would you have presented this young boy and his meager meal to Jesus? Thank God for the faith that was present that day – from which we can learn so much. Multiplication by Faith!