

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
2 Kings 4:42-44 Ephesians 3:14-21 John 6:1-21
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
July 25, 2021 (Traditional)

There's a character in one of Dostoevsky's novels who's always talking about his love for humanity. It's pre-revolutionary Russia. This guy is knee-deep in all the radical movements of the day; he supports every movement that works for social justice and economic equality. But it's funny, because he's always complaining about his roommates, and they're fellow revolutionaries. So he loves humanity, but he sure hates those two guys he lives with. Every little thing—the way they eat, the way they dress, the way they brush their teeth and tie their shoes—annoys him. So he spouts those lofty ideals when it comes to loving everybody, but in reality he's mean and vindictive.

As sinners, we are all severely limited in our ability to love other people in a substantive way. Today's gospel lesson really highlights our human limitations. Thousands of people are gathered on the grass in front of Jesus and his disciples. They're hungry, and a lot of them are sick. It's a big mass of need and brokenness and emptiness out there in the wilderness...Jesus is like a magnet for it. First, notice how he does not ask *which* of those people should be fed. He asks, where are we going to buy enough bread to feed *all* these people? It's an overwhelming task, but he takes it for granted: God wants *all* these people to be fed, not just particular ones, not just a few. Each human being in that crowd is precious to Jesus. So he's putting it in the disciples' faces: "How are you going to love these people the way God loves them?"

Philip immediately responds, it's impossible. Six month's wages wouldn't buy enough to give each person in the crowd more than a few crumbs. So already, Jesus' point is made! Broken human beings living in a broken world will never be able to love and feed each other the way God can. Jesus knows it already. The gospel says, before he even challenged the disciples to feed everyone, he *knew what he was going to do*. So here's the first big question: If Jesus already knew what he was going to do for the hungry crowd, and if he already knew the disciples would never be able to feed everybody, then why did he even challenge Philip and the disciples to feed everyone in the first place? Why did he put it into their minds that they were responsible to feed everyone, if he knew they wouldn't be able to follow through with it?

The answer is this: just because you and I are broken and extremely limited in our ability to love each other and provide for each other the way God wants us to, does not give us an excuse to be selfish. A better way of putting it: We must never forget what God creates us to be, and calls us to be. I mean, we all know people like the self-righteous guy in Dostoevsky's novel. That ugly spirit has infected a lot of people today. He says he loves and wants to feed everyone, but in reality it's all about him pointing the finger at other people. We can see that attitude plain as day, all around us. But make no mistake: what's just as upsetting to God is the opposite: when, after we find out we cannot be the people God wants us to be, we give up trying! I see it in myself way more than I like to

admit. It's always worried me, when some of my Christian family members show this attitude of "I don't care what happens to anyone else—they can drown in their own mess." Where in scripture can we find a justification for that attitude? Yes, in today's gospel lesson, Jesus does for human being what we will never be able as sinners to do for ourselves. But he doesn't do that before challenging us to be the people we're supposed to be. We can never get ourselves off the hook when it comes to our responsibility to each and every human being around us.

Something else this gospel reminds us: Jesus is not just concerned about people's "spiritual" lives. He wants his creatures fed with worldly bread. He's not just interested in taking people out of this world into heaven at some future date. He wants to bring the fullness of divine life into *this* world. He wants people to have the fullness of God's life NOW, not later. If a person is starving, how could that not be a spiritual issue? If you've ever run out of money, you know that's a spiritual issue. Well, God wants to feed people, not just with words, but with bread. He wants to give everyone, even the criminals who might be out there in that crowd, FULNESS OF LIFE IN GOD, right now—not later.

So we hit the crux of the problem in the gospel. Not only is our ability to love pathetic, compared to God's. But our resources are also pathetic. Jesus says "they're hungry—where are you disciples going to get bread to feed them all?" And the disciples' answer is the same as yours and mine: "My love is too small, my resources are too few."

So what can we do? Where do we turn? Well, we know what Jesus does next. A little boy offers his five barley loaves and two fish. But like the disciples point out: what are they among so many people? The answer is...nothing. But then: What does Jesus do with that one boy's small offering?

I think of a workcamp experience I had, years ago. My high school aged crew and I were working for a widow named Arlene in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Arlene was a terminal cancer patient. She once had been a very active, dynamic person, but by the time we met her, she was on oxygen and was pretty much confined to the lower level of her house, which was falling apart. Her son Calvin, whom we also met, was also a terminal cancer patient, and when he was not there, Arlene would burst into tears every time she talked about him. She watched the news every day and once she told me she didn't have much faith in the human race anymore. And yet, by the 2nd day of our work she was coming around with drinks for us, making herself breathless, showing us where to find all her tools and ladders, fixing up a room where we could have lunch--constantly trying to help us in some way.

And at the end of the week, when she saw her newly done bedrooms, her new kitchen floor and counter, and the outside of her house repainted, she was crying, hugging these high school kids, trying to express to them how much this all meant to her, how much they had lifted her up, how happy and new this had all made her feel. And on Friday afternoon, as we pulled away in the van and saw Arlene smiling and waving to us from the door, it struck me.

What did we have to offer her? Not much. Some paint on her walls, some tiles on her floor. Like some bread and two fish...a day's nourishment. We had not taken her cancer away, or her son's. We had taken away none of those realities, of sin and death and evil, which press in on Arlene as they do all of us. Arlene had told us she would probably be gone within the year. So in the big scheme of things, for Arlene, what we did was going to be no more than a brief flash of love, of giving, that she could enjoy. And all six of us in my crew as we drove away...we were still sinners with our own small problems and very limited resources. But in spite of all the chains of reality that still were in place as we drove away, we all knew that something had taken place that week that had broken clean through those chains. We had taken part in something death-defying. Jesus had been there with us. We had lifted up his name in worship and praise in that house. He will make a small offering into something that will last forever.

When you think about it, it's *ridiculous* that the little boy in the gospel offers his lunch to so many hungry people. It's not sensible. When you do that, isn't it going to say something about you? Maybe that you're young and thoughtless.

But there's another possibility. Maybe it means you know a God who will make something out of nothing. Think about it: You and I take a tiny wafer, and a little sip of wine, and we say "with this bread and cup, the kingdom belongs to us forever." And wherever we go, offering up the small amount that we have, in His name, we can be sure that death is going to have to get out of our way.