

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
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**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California**

The Feeding of the 5,000 is one of the best known and best attested Miracle Stories. It is one of the rare miracles that appears in all 4 Gospels, so there's a high likelihood that it goes back to Jesus himself. But for this week, I want to consider the ways in which it's more than a miracle story. There are things going on here beyond the astonishing feat of feeding 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. This is also a kingdom story. It gives us insight into the coming Kingdom and its inner workings. It is also a Eucharistic story, it gives us insight into Holy Communion and its inner workings.

There are a couple of reasons why I say this is a Kingdom story. One of them is something the Sunday Lectionary skips. If we were reading straight through Matthew, immediately before today's reading we would hear the sorry story of the death of John the Baptist. If you remember, Herod is holding John the Baptist prisoner. He respects him, even though John the Baptist repeatedly tells him it is unlawful for him to be married to Herodias, his brother's wife. Herodias resents this. Herod throws a great feast, complete with drinking and dancing. Once everyone is nicely lubricated, Herodias sends her daughter out to dance for the king. Herod is so pleased by his daughter in law's dancing (everyone should be going ewww right now) that he offers her whatever she wants. And she asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

This story is awful in itself, tragic and hard to hear. It is also a vivid picture of the Kingdoms of the World. Power and Riches, yes, but also self indulgence on a large scale, in food, drink, and lubricity. Herod's better impulses towards John the Baptist are drowned by his pride, he feels he cannot go back on his word in front of his guests. And so he does what the Kingdoms of the World do when confronted and challenged by holiness, he has John the Baptist killed.

Jesus hears this news and tries to withdraw by boat to a deserted place. But he is not left alone with his grief and his foreboding, a crowd follows along the shore and finds him. And signs of the Kingdom appear, first healing. Tired and heartsore, still, Jesus walks among the crowd healing their ills as Isaiah promised. When evening comes, Jesus has the crowd sit down on the green grass, evoking Psalm 23 and Manna in the wilderness. Jesus provides them with a different kind of feast, the food is not fancy, but it is abundant. All of this is meant to contrast

sharply with Herod's feast. In this kingdom, there is peace, lovingkindness and healing. In this kingdom, God provides for his people. The contrast is clear.

I also said that this story was a Eucharistic story, and the clue to that is four words describing what Jesus did with the bread and fish. Take, bless, break, and give. He took them, blessed them, broke them, and gave them to the Disciples to give to the crowds. If you listen, you will hear those words, or close versions of those words, repeated in every Eucharistic prayer. They are also repeated in the Emmaus story. They are a clear signal that this story has a Eucharistic dimension.

I remember hearing in graduate school and in seminary that take, bless, break, and give, or share, were the four fundamental actions of the Eucharist. At the time, learning how to be a priest, I think I was focused on bless. But looking at the four actions in this story makes me see how significant the other actions are as well.

Let's start with take. Jesus takes the bread and fish the disciples bring to him, sure that they are inadequate. Jesus is not a magician. He does not conjure bread out of thin air. The Eucharist begins when we offer something to God. Think about that. In practice, I think we try to emphasize this moment. In the Episcopal Church, when you turn something into a procession, you know it's important. The Offertory Procession emphasizes our role in the Eucharist, we offer, God accepts our offering and takes it, and the Eucharist begins there, not with the first words of the Eucharistic prayer. There is no feeding without 5 loaves and 2 fish.

Bless is where God takes what we give, and magnifies and changes it to meet our needs. The Blessing does have some constant components. We remind God of who God is and remember the Last Supper, then call down the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine. We also give thanks to God for all he has done and is doing for us.

Break is perhaps the most mysterious component. Why does the bread have to be broken? What does breaking mean? In the context of today's story, it's clear that the bread must be broken so that it can be multiplied. Only when it's broken is it able to grow. I'm reminded of the saying "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Leonard Cohen has an alternate take on what it means to be broken. He says "There's a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." It's my belief that the bread to feed the crowd didn't all appear at once, poof! It appeared as it was repeatedly broken and given to each person present.

The final component is give, and this is true to the wording as it appears in the Gospels. God gives back to us what we have given him, but he has blessed it and transformed it, and now it will bless and transform us. Again, I think there's

something to be learned about this component from today's Gospel. Jesus gives the broken bread to the disciples, and in their turn, they give it to the crowd. *The Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* has the four components as take, bless, break, and share. It is not true to the wording of the Gospels, but it's worth thinking about. The giving doesn't stop when we receive communion from Jesus' hand. We are meant to share the lovingkindness and mercy we receive with others.

So perhaps you can see why I say this is not just a miracle story, it is a kingdom story and a communion story. I find myself wondering if what is true of communion in this story might also be true of the kingdom. And that is, that the kingdom begins where communion begins, with things, ideas, arts, music, sciences, things we have made and offer to God. God may bless them, and fill them with his Spirit, but they will not be unrecognizable after he transforms them. God waits to see what we will bring and offer him, and God receives it all with love. May we in our turn, after it has been blessed and broken, receive it back with love, trust, gratitude, and willingness to share.