

Seventeenth Sunday – July 26, 2015

In this summer season of picnics, we remember today the most famous picnic in religious history. Today's gospel wins the prize as Scripture's number one picnic because it's told 6 times in the 4 gospels: twice each in Matthew and Mark, once in Luke and once in John. The details of this famous picnic vary a bit in each telling; today we hear John's rendition.

Notice first that John's gospel doesn't portray Jesus teaching the crowds. Jesus' action of nourishing is the first teaching. "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" he asks. Just then a little boy shows up with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. When the disciples have pointed out all the absurd limitations of their ability to meet a need so overwhelming, Jesus swings into action.

The people recline in preparation for a feast. Jesus prays and gives thanks. Once the child handed over the food, it's God's food, and it was therefore God's goodness that the crowd was going to share.

We are not told how the food was multiplied. The how of it is not the point John's gospel wants to make. The point is the God satisfied the hunger of the people and it began with the generosity of one of the least among them.

What might this story mean for us today? Perhaps we might benefit from looking at it from below. Many people who know poverty, or who have passed beyond the end of their rope and still survive, see this gospel story as an example of God's providence. They can tell story after story about how God sent someone at just the right moment; how someone found the money for rent on the morning before the eviction; how a donation came in on the day that the orphanage ran out of food... how God comes through again and again, through some often unsuspecting, usually unexpected, generous soul.

This gospel story is good news because it tells us that God is concerned about people who hunger. It is good news because it reminds us that God can work wonders with the little we have; if we are willing to give it, we can help create the abundance God desires for everyone.

What do we need to convince ourselves of what we say we believe: that God provides? With God in our midst, we can always make a banquet out of what seems to be pretty poor fare.