

Crossing Boundaries - Within Us and in Front of Us

I could not believe my good fortune when I found out that I would get to preach today. Not because I get to preach, to preach here and to preach to you. I do love to preach here when the opportunity arises.

Sometimes some of you like it too. Once, several years ago, after one of the services where I preached, someone walked out, shook my hand, looked me warmly in the eyes and said, “I love it when you preach here. Each one of your sermons is better than the next.” (Took me a while, too.)

Of course, all of us in the ministry want you not only to like what we do but to like us as well. This may be one of the misguided reasons for entering this profession in the first place. But, here is the problem every preacher faces. The truth of the Gospel is not something we always want to hear. The relevant word of God is not what we necessarily want to hear but what we need to hear. And, no one ever wants to be told what they need. If you doubt me, go try it. Go up to someone, even one of your best and closest friends, and say, “You know what you need?” See what kind of warm response you get.

The real reason I was glad to find out I’d be preaching today is because of the Gospel selection. I love the feeding stories in the Gospels.

There are six feeding stories in the Jesus narratives. The one you heard today is perhaps the best known version. This story is one of four referred to as “the feeding of the 5,000.” It is found in all four of the Gospels. There is also a story called “the feeding of the 4,000.” It is found in Matthew and Mark.

One of the wonderful things about the collection of writings we call “the Bible” is that, for the most part, most of what is in the Bible is of incredible spiritual complexity. On the one hand what is found there is safe enough for a child to wade in and be bathed by. On the other hand the Bible contains stories, like this one, that are so rich and profound that their unfathomable depths cannot be exhausted.

A child can safely be told that Jesus could and does work miracles on and in the lives of people.

At the same time several biblical scholars have devoted their academic lives to exploring the meaning and mystery of just these feeding stories stories alone.

I remember when it first came to my awareness that the story of Jesus feeding a multitude was told six times in the tradition, thinking, “There must be something to this. Something must have *really* happened.” Fortunately, I had a professor in seminary who said that it wasn’t what happened that mattered so much as what the story meant.

We have a belief in our culture. One that has been handed to us, one we have fallen for and continue to tell. It is a story of separation and scarcity.

There is another story possible and you find it in this Gospel story today. It is the story of abundance, caring and compassion. We are called to follow Jesus who still cares that everybody in the world has enough to eat. As with the gift of the young boy’s lunch, what we do with what we have can still make a difference.

It is understandable, when we are confronted with the statistics of death by starvation all over the globe or the fact that perhaps a third of students in the Houston Independent School District go to bed hungry at night, that we, like Phillip and Andrew, might feel discouraged and helpless. Yet, nonetheless, we are called to follow Jesus.

Let’s face it, the fact is that it *is* difficult to embrace an ethic of compassion and generosity in our time. We might come to church and be inspired by a sermon like this regarding food justice. But, we leave here to live in a culture of potlucks and processed foods, of cheap food from Walmart and boutique food from Whole Foods, all of it making right relationship with food tough. A friend of mine once said, “The people who shop at Whole Foods are the nicest people in the world - until they get in the Whole Foods parking lot.”

That seminary professor I mentioned earlier once read this story to a very large class of students. He said, “I want you to pick someone in this story that you most closely identify with. Think about it carefully because I’m going to call on you to justify your answer.”

There was a period of silence.

“How many of you identify with the crowd, someone in the crowd?” A host of hands went up. Randomly students were called on to justify their answers. “We were eager to hear Jesus.” “After a while we became hungry.” There were other similar answers.

“How many of you identify with the disciples?” Again, a number of hands went up. Again students were called upon. The answers were good. “We felt it was our job to take care of Jesus.” “The crowd was getting out of hand.” “They needed to go home and give us a break.” And so it went.

“How many of you identify with the boy?” I was surprised that so few hands went up. Most seminary students want to be seen as heroic, as stars. That’s projection on my part.

“How many of you identify with Jesus?” Not a hand went up.

“That,” said the professor, “is our problem. We are not only to identify with Jesus but also we are to be Jesus in the world to people in need.”

I know I shouldn’t be but I am appalled by the lack of good, thorough biblical and religious literacy in our country. Especially among church-going people who say that they believe in and follow Jesus.

Though, as I said, a child can safely enter into the teachings in the Bible, to plumb the Bible’s depths, to read it correctly is not easy. Just because a person owns a Bible doesn’t necessarily mean that they know how to read it. Just because someone has a socket wrench doesn’t mean they are qualified to work on the engine of a Maserati.

A man went to see his son’s high school guidance counselor. His son had not done well in high school and his prospects for getting into college were not good. The guidance counselor said as much. The boy’s options were between slim and none.

The father said, “Maybe we could get him into one of those Bible colleges.”

“Why would you do that?” asked the counselor.

“Well,” said the dad, “One book. Four years. How hard could it be?”

In my own teaching one of the things I want to combat is fundamentalism. In any religion fundamentalism always end up being abusive. The Bible is to this day used by people in ways that are 180 degrees counter to the teaching of Jesus.

Some people claim that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and should be taken literally. This is absolutely the worst way to approach the Bible. This kind of literalism always leads to one kind of violence or another.

The Bible can be so easily misused and abused and is most often done in a way that leads to the misuse and abuse of people, of God’s children.

Let me give you a tiny example:

There is a statement attributed to Jesus that reads like this:

“For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” (Mark 14:7)

This verse is often used as an excuse to do nothing about poverty. But that is not what Jesus is saying here at all.

The setting in Mark for this saying is that Jesus and his disciples are having a meal and at the dinner with them is a leper. Jesus is making an assumption about his disciples. That is to say, about us. He is in effect saying to us, “Look, because you are my disciples, I know and you know who you will hang out with, who you will share your meals with, who we focus our attention on. You’ve been watching me. You know what my priorities are. So you will always be with the poor. You will always have an opportunity to share with them.”

Jim Wallace, one of the authors of the statement of faith issued by a group of Christian leaders this past Lenten season and titled “Reclaiming Jesus,” says that “social location often determines biblical interpretation.” What that means is that people who are well-off can easily miss the consistent emphasis in the teachings of Jesus on justice, simplicity and equality.

Though we can talk a “good game” about inclusivity and equality, the fact is that most Christian worship services in this country are still fairly segregated along color and economic lines. This is probably because that is how we organize our lives socially outside of our worship services.

When I was in seminary sometimes students would wonder what church, if any, Jesus would be part of if he were here today. Likely none. It would be a matter of which synagogue he would attend - if any. His message to us would be now what it was then: If you want to understand the outer poverty, injustice and absurdity in the world look at your own inner poverty, injustice and absurdity.

It is when we can recognize our inner brokenness and have acceptance and compassion for that, that we can begin to see and address the brokenness that exists in the world around us.

Jesus clearly said that the litmus test of whether we trusted him enough to follow him was how we treated what he referred to as “the least of these.” I think that Jesus’ emphasis on “the least of these” was not initially for their benefit but for our own, for our own redemption, for our own liberation, for our own healing; not just to help others. Or, as Richard Rohr puts it, “to pad our spiritual resume.” Rohr goes on to say, “I can’t hate the person on welfare, when I realize I’m on God’s welfare.”

The great Christian mystics know and teach that the truth of non-duality is that the inner and the outer world reflect one another. As compassion, love and kindness flow out from us to anyone else, wounds are healed - theirs and ours.

I love the Gospel text for today. It starts and ends with Jesus and his disciples crossing over to the other side. He was always doing that. Crossing boundaries of all sorts and calling us to follow him.

This wonderful story, where Jesus feeds a crowd with very little food, reveals for us the nature of spiritual reality.

We are like the disciples who live out of a world-view of scarcity: “How will two fish and five loaves be enough for so many?” In all six of the multiplication stories there is always much left over. The universe always has more than enough of itself to give, if the doors of the mind and heart are left open.

America’s unhealthy economics and politics persist because we largely operate out of a worldview of scarcity, which leads to actual scarcity: there is not enough land, never enough healthcare, never enough water, never enough money, and never enough housing for all of us, and there are never enough guns to keep us safe.

The good news of the Gospel is not about God as some external being invading the world in order to rescue “fallen” human beings. It is, rather, about Jesus leading humans, that’s us, to discover that God is always in our midst, always caring for, providing for, giving blessed assurance even when the boat we are in is beset with the storms of life. And, at the same time, God is also always in front of us, calling us to follow.

The good new of the Gospel is about our being called and empowered to break the boundaries that imprison us in a warped sense of what it means to be human. It is about crossing those boundaries that we have created in our misguided quest for security. It is about stepping across those boundaries into the meaning of God.

Jesus is a barrier-breaking Christ, inviting all people into the meaning of God’s life and love. The way of Christ is not the way of separation, emphasizing difference and building walls to keep out those who are different. The way of Jesus is reconciliation, the overcoming of differences and reaching out to those who are estranged.

I grew up Southern Baptist. That infected me with what we know as the “great commission,” a missional sense. It is what I was taught to call “foreign missions.” I hope you know the “great commission”:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Now, later in my life, further down the road of trying to follow Jesus, I still have that missional sense. I hope you are hearing it in this sermon. But, I hear it differently now:

Go to all the nations. Go to those you have defined as beyond the boundaries of the love of God. Go to those you have decided you can reject. Go to those you have judged as inadequate. Go to the different. Go beyond the level of your own security needs. Go to those who threaten you. Embrace them as I have embraced you. Accept them as fellow pilgrims walking into the mystery of God.

In the power of this mystery, hear spoken from the very heart of God to you as if you were the only one, “Fear not.” And with those fears gone, say “goodbye” not only to your insecurities but also your prejudices. Live knowing that the human community has room for all. There is enough for all with baskets full left over if we are only willing to heed the call of Jesus to cross the boundaries that lead us to true freedom and love.