

9 Pentecost B 21

2 Kings 4:42-44

Psalms 145:10-18

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

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Grace and peace to you from Christ.

Again, we are amazed at this remarkable story of feasting, fish and friends, an abundance in an abundance of ways! Perhaps this year this story has special significance for us as we have begun to return to gathering with one another. We're only just beginning to imagine gathering together again!

Our hunger hasn't been from our bellies, but from loneliness, isolation, fear, questions and uncertainty. We've faced hurdles of technology, mask wearing, vaccine questions and daily reports of the spread of the virus. Perhaps we haven't even taken the time to pause and reflect on just what we felt this year or how we feel moving forward.

So, pause then. Pause and dare to name or identify or uncover where you are at. Where do you ache? Dream? Where is your pain? What wounds need attention? What joy is percolating up from the deep?

In John's gospel story, Jesus' good news for us comes near the end. It's not really a message of free food or how to plan a picnic, or even a lesson on water sports, but it's captured in the words of Jesus himself as he states "Don't be afraid."

Can we just let that sink in for a moment? *Don't be afraid.* Take a breath; don't be afraid.

Those simple words and knowing just who they come from, can powerfully transform our circumstances and teach us a new vision for the challenges we face. The two examples provided explain just how.

Jesus' followers faced what appeared to be an exceptionally large and complex problem. As we heard, there was a large crowd gathered to hear Jesus teach and as time went on they were becoming hungry. The disciples were perplexed how to get enough food for them all. As a small boy presents what he has, all are fed with plenty left over. The disciples learned that the huge problem they faced could be met with thinking outside the box, with inviting or rather accepting the help of others, even if it seems meagre.

How often have we shirked off a small offer of assistance? Perhaps someone offers to pray for us, watch the dog, give us a ride, water the plants – and we've

said no or thought the offer too insignificant. Yet, in this story we are invited to see one another as agents of God's work as we enact small acts of love. Through such means God provides, God accompanies us.

Or perhaps you've been the one who felt that the help you were able to offer was too little and that it couldn't possibly make any difference at all. Sometimes we think, "no one will need me and what I can give." Don't be afraid, Jesus reminds you. Invite others, offer what you can, big or small, certain or uncertain and then leave it up to God to work with what you offer. As we see here, God can do amazing things!

IN part two of this story, after collecting the abundance of leftovers, the disciples head out on the lake and a storm begins to brew, threatening their lives. When you have faced a problem, even a very serious one, have you ever wondered or even been angry with God about it? Sometimes we think that as people of faith we should be immune to such problems, but we can see from the lives the Jesus' followers that day, that challenge and fear transcend the boundary of faith. Just because we're faith-filled doesn't mean we won't avert fear or problems.

And even when we've been working hard (as the disciples rowed for miles) sometimes what we can do isn't enough. That's really when we become afraid isn't it; when we have met our own limitations, when we don't have the resources or strength to carry on, when we're at our wits end to make sense of our lives, when we can no longer rely on ourselves. That is a scary moment. But it's also an opportunity, an opening for God to move in and calm our fears, tend our loneliness, and bring us to a safe place again. And that's what happens here in John's story. As the storm worsens, Jesus arrives and they suddenly find themselves safe and sound!

As people of faith this is why we take the time to worship, study the Bible, pray together – again small acts of discipleship, but essential to nourishing us along the way through the path of life. As Jesus gives his own life for us, he models generosity and companionship, patience, invitation, healing and calls us to be his own love for one another.

That's precisely what the disciples were learning. A day would come when Jesus wouldn't be among them in the same way, a day when they would need to take the reins of sharing radical and persistent love for a hungry and fearful world.

Do we then, dare to ask questions in our own time as they did? Where can we buy bread for the hungry? Where can we accompany empty lives? Are we willing to bring our two fish, our tithes, or our time as offerings? Such

offerings do serve to change lives! Are we able to imagine that our lives as disciples are invited into holy work this very day?

And when we fall short, when we are exhausted or find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic or just coming out of it, when we are filled with questions and doubts that feel overwhelming – are we able to remind one another of Jesus' words to us, *don't be afraid?*

Don't be afraid to live into your own discipleship. To trust in Christ even more than you trust in yourself. Don't be afraid to teach your children or grandchildren the depth of love and how challenging, beautiful and amazing it is. Don't be afraid to give abundantly and then be prepared to witness God's ability to multiply it. Don't be afraid when you feel alone, grieving, worried about the future, or are even near the end of life.

Into all such places of the human experience God speaks words of promise and encouragement as God, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, covenants to never leave us. May our lives learn to recognize God's generosity and may our lives reflect such abundance.

Amen.