

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
July 28, 2024 – The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
John 6:1-21  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Last Sunday afternoon Don and I went to Capital Park in Augusta for a walk. It's a lovely park, not far from where we live, with walking paths and benches in the shade of magnificent old trees. We walked, then took a rest on one of those benches. Not long after, a woman and her teenage son came along and sat on the bench opposite us. We smiled at one another, then sat quietly for a time. Then, out of the blue, the woman asked, "Do you go to church?" We chuckled and I replied that I am an Episcopal priest serving this parish. Then she asked, "What do you think about Jesus?" After a long pause, I finally gave her my theologically astute reply, "That's a big question!"

The conversation went on. She asked if I believed in the literal truth of the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden recorded in Genesis. No, but she did. She asked if I believed that because of the Fall, God had to sacrifice his Son on the cross to make things right – the substitutionary theory of atonement. No, but she did. She asked if I believed that people could only be saved through Jesus, because Jesus had said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Once again, no, but she did.

I began to feel like I'd failed the test of my faith. I couldn't give simple answers about what I regard as complex theological issues. Finally, I said that I thought God wanted us to become loving people and that there are many paths to becoming loving. I said this because I believe it, but also because my heart was full of compassion and awe, listening to this woman sitting beside her son, who was severely handicapped, interacting with him with patience and love, speaking to strangers about her faith in God, who clearly meant the world and more to her.

I don't want to mislead you. I do think that what we believe about God and Jesus matters, that some ways of thinking about God and about Jesus are closer to the truth than others, and that we should do our best to think about God and to understand what we can know of God. But what I felt then was wonder at her faith. I recalled the many times Jesus healed people and said, "Go in peace, your faith has saved you."

And I thought of the compassion of Jesus. Last week we heard that Jesus had compassion on the crowds of people who were following him because they were "like sheep without a shepherd," so he taught them. He had compassion for the crowds of sick people who followed him, so he healed them. Today we feel Jesus' compassion for the crowds who were hungry, so he fed them. Confronted by the suffering and neediness of the people he encountered, Jesus' response was compassion, compassion that led to action to relieve suffering.

The account of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. That gives us a clue to its importance. As you may know, John's Gospel

differs in several ways from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in its description of events in the life and ministry of Jesus. One difference is that John presents the meaning and interpretation of events more than the other gospel writers. For him, miracles are “signs,” important not only in themselves but also in what they tell us about Jesus and about God. At the beginning of this morning’s lesson, we read: “A large crowd kept following [Jesus], because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Matthew and Luke simply note that Jesus “cured the sick.” Just facts, without an invitation to consider what the facts tell us about who Jesus is.

It is in next week’s reading from the Gospel of John that we are given the meaning of Jesus feeding the five thousand, that is, what this sign tells us about who Jesus is. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). The meaning of the sign goes beyond a meal of bread and fish miraculously provided. The meaning of the sign is that Jesus offers himself, the Bread of Life, to those who go to him, to those who believe in him, who trust him. And we need to remember that bread was an essential component of daily life in the ancient world. Essential to daily life – that is also who Jesus is, as John is reminding us.

Back to the account of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. John gives the same basic factual account of the feeding of the five thousand that we have from the other gospel writers, but with some differences. John is the only writer to make this note about the grass: “now there was a great deal of grass in the place.” Matthew just says “grass,” Mark says “green grass,” and Luke doesn’t mention the grass at all. Why would John make the point that there was “a great deal of grass”? Because John is the writer who identifies Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, leads his sheep to a place where they may feed on “a great deal of grass,” which is a very good thing for the hungry sheep. And it is a hint of the meaning of the feeding miracle about to take place: Jesus will feed the people with an abundance of food, enough to satisfy all the people. Not an amount sufficient only to keep people from fainting with hunger, but an amount that was enough, an amount that filled each person’s needs. Jesus was and is the Good Shepherd, offering God’s people not only some bread and fish to sustain them for a day, but himself, the Bread of Life, our sustenance for eternity.

The woman on the bench asked one more question, about eternal life and how we attain it. The words of The Absolution came to my mind, when the priest asks God to “strengthen [the congregation] in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.” We believe that God will strengthen us in goodness whenever we deeply desire goodness and join our wills to God’s will. We believe that when we desire goodness and when we love, we are in Love (capital L). When we love, we already know eternal life because our hearts have joined with the compassionate heart of Christ. With God’s help to keep us on the path of love and by God’s grace, we have the power to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. And when we love, we already know at least a hint of what eternal life means – life with God who means all the world and more to us and to a vast company of faithful people. In Jesus’ name. Amen.