

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "divine multiplication"

Anyone ever had an experience like this? Your young child, or niece or nephew, or grandchild, takes an interest in a golf cart. Maybe she has seen you driving it around for some simple errands or maybe just plain fun. So you let her get behind the wheel, you teach her how to work the simple controls, and off she goes. She quite successfully navigates the little golf cart around a completely contained environment with no other vehicle traffic and never exceeds fifteen miles per hour.

Now everything seems wonderful until later that afternoon. You're ready to take her home, but as you're getting ready she slips into the driver's seat of the car ahead of you. She flashes you a huge grin and tells you to hand over the keys. "After all," she says, "how much harder can it be?" *Uh oh.*

It seems as if we've all been thrust into a situation kind of like this, only we're the ones in the driver's seat, and we're just beginning to process how much more difficult the challenge that lies in front of us is than we had anticipated.

See, I don't know about you, but I must have been sick the day they covered in grad school how to manage a household and run a church during a global pandemic that shuts down half the known economy for an indefinite period of time. I also somehow managed to miss the memo on how to repair a social fabric with jagged and complex tears that date back decades and sometimes even centuries or millenia.

I doubt I'm alone right now in looking out the window and seeing obstacles and dangers far bigger than anything I feel trained to confront.

Now this would be very bad news indeed, were it not for a wonderful divine characteristic that shows up in today's Gospel.

The feeding of the five thousand is a miracle that shows up in all four of the Gospels. Today we heard Matthew's account.

While the accounts differ slightly in detail, they all have one thing in common: Jesus didn't start with nothing. When Jesus declares his intent to feed a huge crowd in the middle of the wilderness, someone brings him at least a little something: a few loaves, and a couple of fish.

Now, every character in the story, including Jesus, is entirely clear that this is nowhere near enough to feed the crowd. It's not even enough to make a dent. But, Jesus orders them to distribute it nonetheless. And then, an astonishing thing happens.

Somehow, between that moment of decision and the moment where everyone begins to eat, the food multiplies by an unfathomably large factor, and there's enough for everyone! No one seems to be able to identify exactly when and how this happens, but the final result is unequivocal. Everyone eats and is satisfied.

Is this not how God seems to always work miracles in and around us? Looking at things up front, we have nowhere near enough for the task that faces us. Not enough time, not enough money, not enough power, not enough allies, not enough of anything. And yet, if we bring what little we do have to the table, trusting that, in

spite of all appearances it *is* enough, God somehow miraculously makes it enough.

Perhaps you've heard of Lech Walesa. If you have, you probably know him as the leader of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the first freely elected president of that nation, and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. But that's not how it started. Walesa began simply as an electrician and then later a union organizer. Can you imagine how, at his humble beginnings, he would likely have reacted if you'd told him he would lead Poland out of Communist rule and into modern-day democracy? He would probably have laughed out loud. And yet that is exactly what happened.

Walesa humbly and prayerfully brought what little he had to the table, knowing it was entirely inadequate for the task at hand. And then all the other pieces fell into place, and a successful revolution occurred without a single shot being fired.

Time would fail me to tell all the other stories of this kind that can be told. Every triumph of goodness and righteousness in human history looked impossible up front. And in every case, a faithful few simply brought everything they had to the task, knowing that by all appearances failure was inevitable, and they discovered for themselves the truth of the Scripture: "For mortals it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

So now, let's take this to our current time and place. Where and how are we being offered the chance to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes?

There's of course the most obvious answer. It can seem impossible that we're going to get out from under the shadow of this virus in one piece. How will we ever escape the collapse of physical and mental health, of communities and economies, that seems to be happening before our very eyes? The answer is we won't without God's help. But with God's help, things can turn out very differently. None of us has nearly enough to bring to the table to confront this challenge. But we all have something, however small it may be. And if we bring it, and if we trust that God does indeed multiply what we offer until it's enough to feed every hungry mouth, we may just find ourselves saved after all.

And what of the other challenges? Do any of us have enough power in our arsenal to reverse the steady destruction of the rainforests and coastlands that sustain life on this planet? Does anyone possess the singular wisdom that will get us to stop sorting ourselves into violent little identity pods that seem bent on the demonization and destruction of everyone else? No, of course not.

But each of us has a tiny something. We each have a nugget of energy or a pearl of wisdom we can offer up in service of feeding and healing this world. And we each have the capacity to trust that when we do that, God will do with our offering what we by

ourselves cannot. God will multiply that offering as much as necessary to make it something that is adequate to the task. It may seem slow and imperceptible, but that doesn't mean it isn't happening.

Take heart my friends. It has happened before, it is happening now, and it will continue to happen into the future, as long as there are faithful disciples on the earth, willing to offer up a few loaves and a couple of fish to the One whose power and generosity know no limits.