

Text: John 6: 1-21

Title: the Feeding of the 500 and the prosperity Gospel

Date: July 26, 2009

I experienced an odd juxtaposition of events last week. Last Thursday, Cleo Crosun invited me to Interfaith to meet Sister Claudia. I am not sure what I expected. I knew that they operated on a shoestring budget- but that really isn't true- most shoestrings have more budget than Interfaith does. For those of you who may not be familiar with Interfaith, they were founded by the ministerial association back in the 70 in the wake of a tornado that touched down. Their mission is to help those that sociologists refer to as the underclass; who the Bible calls the poor. They are the folks who, whether from bad luck, unfortunate circumstance, or poor choice find themselves on the bottom looking up- and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. But no matter who calls whom what- Sister Claudia and her volunteers call them by their names and treat them with dignity as they seek to help them stretch their limited resources.

The other thing that happened to be is that I stumbled across a video of Jim Bakker. Way back in the 80s, Jim founded the PTL ministries and was one of the founders of the Trinity Broadcast Network that shows a number of T preachers. He preached what came to be known as the Prosperity Gospel. The basic notion was that God wants us to be rich and if we are faithful God will make us all millionaires. Of course, being faithful meant sending the TV preachers money. Name your desires; claim them as God's promise to you and God will buy you that Mercedes Benz. Remember all the jokes about touching the phone number flashing on the TV screen and feeling the power of God? Jim Bakker didn't invent the Prosperity Gospel- I think the credit for that goes to Oral Roberts- but he and his then wife Tammy Faye perfected it. The top blew off amid a sex scandal and disclosures of shady financial practices and over the top spending (remember the air conditioned doghouse?). At their height they were raking in a million dollars a week. To make a long story short, Jim got nailed for fraud and was sent to prison.

He got out recently- and guess what? He's back on the preaching circuit. But this time he is denouncing the Prosperity Gospel! Evidently he had time in prison to really read the Bible and see the whole name and claim it for the heresy that it is.

The reason that I bring this up is that John is very cynical when it comes to human nature and the Gospel. John understands that many respond to the Gospel out of mixed motives- but as far as he is concerned, that is just part of the human condition. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the feeding of the 5000 serves to demonstrate Jesus' authority as he fulfills Messianic expectations. It does that here as well, yet John adds another dimension- Jesus knowingly welcoming those who come from mixed motives.

We are told this right from the start. Large crowds are following Jesus- because of the signs he was performing in healing the sick. In other words- Jesus was the best show in town. They are on a hillside, the traditional place for the feeding of the 5000 in on a hillside on the northwest corner of Lake Galilee. Jesus looks out at the crowd- and makes a decision. John wants us to understand that Jesus initiated this miracle, that he wasn't just reacting to unforeseen events.

So he asks his disciples how they are going to feed all of these people. the disciples gather, realizing that Jesus has asked them to do the impossible, that the challenge at had exceeds any reasonable assessment of their resources. Phillip points out that there is no way in God's green earth that they could buy the food necessary. Andrew volunteers that there is a boy with 2 fish and 5 loaves. I've often wondered about that kid, how did they get him to give up his food? I am willing to bet that it is significant that Andrew is the one who found him. Andrew is the one, after all, who got his brother Simon Peter to put down his nets long enough to meet Jesus. I'd like to think he persuaded the kid to volunteer. (patron saint of stewardship?.....)

In any event, Jesus is presented with 5 loaves and the 2 fish. The crowd is seated; Jesus gives thanks, and starts handing out food. In a traditional Jewish dinner party, the host would invite his guests to be seated; the host would give thanks; it would be the host that would distribute food to each of his guests. John's point is clear: it is Jesus who is providing the food – Jesus is the host at this dinner. Any of John's readers would recognize this as foreshadowing of the Last Supper and the initiation of the New Covenant.

What's more than that, there are 12 bushels of leftovers. In Exodus, God provided manna with the strict proviso that they do not try to take more than they need. If they did, the manna would spoil and get all wormy. The only time the Children of

Israel were allowed to take more than one day's supply was the day before Sabbath- so that they would not have to work on the Sabbath day. Now we have Jesus providing more than enough. Jesus trumps Moses; the New Covenant eclipses the Old Covenant.

Now if this was Communion Sunday, we could stop right here and segue to the Lord's Supper. Oh well, next Sunday. For now we are in the same boat as the disciples, weighing the challenges of ministry we face with our notions of prosperity. The reaction of the people Jesus fed is instructive. In the other gospels immediately after the feast Jesus and the disciples get into the boats and cross the Sea of Galilee. I have no idea what the crowds were doing – taking a post dinner nap? Here though, John tells us that they recognize Jesus for the Messiah and decide to cash in.

Jesus demonstrates his omniscience (another attribute of God in human flesh) by recognizing that they wanted to take him by force and proclaim him King. A political revolution- especially one that was driven by food is the last think on he agenda. So he withdraws into the mountains to pray. It isn't until evening when he and the disciples go back to the boats. Presumably the crowd has dispersed by then.

Imagine wanting to keep Jesus to yourself, so you could have your own private perpetual bakery. I know, ridiculous. But that is in no way different than the message the "touch the screen" guys are still pushing. The reason that it is heresy is that it reduces worship, which should be God centered; our recognition of who God is and our declarations of praise and adoration. To turn that into God wanting to give us stuff is to act as if God works for us, or even worse, to treat God as if he worships us! If that is not Idolatry, then I do not know what is.

Of course no one here is about to fall into that trap. The folks who find that appealing tend to be the have nots- looking enviously at those they consider the haves. Presbyterians tend to be solidly middle class. We have a certain amount of wealth- but we still work for a living. No the trap we tend to fall into is the on that the disciples fell into, measuring our ability to do ministry by our own assessment of our resources. It was Philip who said that it would take more than 6 month wages to feed this crowd- you just gotta know that he was Presbyterian at heart. Not only does he know how much that this is going to cost- he know he can't afford it!

All kidding aside- the point of the feeding of the 5000 is that Jesus has unlimited resources to do ministry because of who he is. Therefore we have unlimited resources to engage in the ministries that we are called to- for Jesus makes those resources available to us. Ask anyone who has been involved in ministries like Interfaith- and a number of our people are- Groups like Interfaith are always hovering this side of being broke, but somehow God always provides. A grant here, a donation there. I wish that there was no need, but as Jesus said that the poor would always be with us, and that we will always be called to alleviate their suffering when we can.

Bottom line, prosperity isn't about having x number of TVs, x number of cars, or food in the fridge or a roof over our heads. Prosperity is about having enough to enjoy and having enough to share. For in the sharing, sharing with each other, sharing with others, we experience what it is to be bonded together in Christ's body. It is God who is the source of all our blessings. Let us give thanks- and share those blessings with others.