

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

This Summer my sermons have focused on the Old Testament scriptures (mostly pertaining to King David) and Paul's letter to the Ephesians as offered each Sunday by the Revised Common Lectionary. It's a good plan but it leaves out the wonderful stories in the ignored gospel readings, even some of the ones that are most familiar to all of us. One of those, The Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6:1-21) is a favorite of mine because each of the many parts of this story are rich in theological and spiritual meaning. Incredibly, each phrase makes an entire sermon possible.



This year I found myself drawn to the very first line, "Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberius." It's the kind of sentence that you just ignore so that you might get on with the crux of the story. Yet, I began to wonder why the two names and why did the author think it was important to let us know that there were two names. And, what in the world do these two names have to do with the miracle of the meager five loaves and two fish feeding five thousand people?

In the Old Testament we find that the Hebrew people originally called this body of water "The Sea of Kineret," but that name was eventually replaced by the more commonly used name, "The Sea of Galilee". In 20 C.E. King Herod Antipas built a new city on its shores and named it Tiberius after the Roman Emperor. The King filled it with pagan citizens and built temples and shrines to accommodate the worship of their gods. Devout Jews hated Tiberius and avoided it and refused to call it by its new name. But, the city grew and became so regionally predominant that the nearby lake also became known as the Sea of Tiberius.

Eventually Tiberius became a prosperous economic center for the globalization of the Roman fishing industry that exploited local fishermen, raised taxes, shipped the best fish to the richest parts of the Empire, and left only the scraps to feed the local people. Merely hearing the name, "The Sea of Tiberius" was a daily reminder to the Jews of their nation's occupation by Rome, the destruction of their fishing industry, and the idolatry of paganism.

Now it seems clear that the intent of the opening sentence to this story - "Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias" - not only speaks of the location but of the politics of the time of Jesus. This familiar story might be less about having lunch with Jesus and more about the contrast between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of God that Jesus has come to proclaim.

The point of Jesus' miracle is clear...the kingdom of God is a reign of gratitude, provision, and abundance. The gifts of God are available to everyone who hungers. All will be fed and there will be more than enough... twelve baskets more!

The people loved it. Who wouldn't? Compared to their daily existence of grueling imperial-induced poverty, meager wages, and high taxes the miracle of multiplying bread and fish enough for everyone was the best show in town. Sure it happened in a city filled with pagans and named for a Roman Emperor with a puppet King in charge, but who are they in comparison to this wandering prophet-rabbi-healer who surprised them with lunch and a miracle on the side.

So, they hatched a plan to force Jesus to become their new king. But, Jesus walked away from power...at least the sort of power recognized in our world. (A great lesson for all Christians who might give credence to Christian Nationalism) And, he helped his followers understand that the kingdom he preached was not like that of Caesar. No, the coming kingdom of God would usher in a life of abundance for them all...an abundance of forgiveness, an abundance of grace, and an abundance of love...even if at first it looked like just five little loaves and a couple of fish served by an itinerant rabbi from Nazareth.

