

A Sermon by Nat Reid

29 July 2012

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Our Gospel passage will be my point of departure today. I want to consider three things, primarily: the incredible fruitfulness, or abundance of God; the limitations of the rational mind we glimpse in Phillip; and the symbolism of the story which follows where we see Jesus walking across the water toward the disciples.

As I began preparing for today, I was at first a bit unenthusiastic about the lectionary readings—an unusual experience for me... But as I sat prayerfully with them over the weeks, they began to unfold their riches and to connect in unexpected and exciting ways. The living quality of the scriptures was again brought home to me as these passages came alive for me.

I was especially challenged, at first, by the Gospel passage, John's account of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water. I have been reading a book called *The Gospel according To Jesus*, by the great translator of spiritual texts, Stephen Mitchell. Mitchell is very sympathetic to Thomas Jefferson and his "Jefferson Bible," in which he attempted to compile the authentic teachings of Jesus, and to eliminate passages he felt were added for various theological or political reasons over the years. He removed all of the mythological aspects of the gospels, and the miracles, and focused on the essential teachings of Jesus.

In his book, Mitchell does the same thing—with a few more

centuries of scholarship at his disposal.

I too am sympathetic to this approach, but also critical of it. I am wary because it concedes to the limitations of the excessively rational modern mind. I want to read a brief passage from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan's book, *The Last Week*, which addresses this problem.

One should not think of history as "true" and parable as "fiction" (and therefore not nearly as important). Only since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century have many people thought this way, for in the Enlightenment Western culture began to identify truth with "factuality." Indeed, this identification is one of the central characteristics of modern Western culture. Both biblical literalists and people who reject the bible completely do this: the former insist that the truth of the Bible depends on its literal factuality, and the latter see that the bible cannot be literally and factually true and therefore don't think it is true at all.

But parable, independently of historical factuality, can be profoundly true. Indeed, it may be that the most important truths can be expressed only in parable. In any case, we are convinced that asking about the parabolic meaning of biblical stories... is always the most important question. The alternative of fixating on "whether it happened this way" almost always leads one astray. (194)

Borg and Crossan identify an essential problem in the identification of truth with factuality. We are losing our ability to think parabolically, symbolically, poetically—to live with mystery.

I think this problem is expressed in today's gospel passage by Phillip.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him,

Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

Phillip is trapped, in his mind, in rational thinking. There is no other answer to the question in this frame of mind.

Now, as I looked into things a little as I prepared for this sermon, I noticed that in John's gospel Jesus never uses parables—or at least, in a quick search I couldn't find any.

So the parable, this essential, enigmatic, riddle-like way of teaching, so characteristic of Jesus in the other Gospels, is absent in John. In John we have unique and rich spiritual discourses, but no parables. But the parabolic meaning of the story is evident, and given the lack of parables in John, our ability to perceive the parabolic meaning of events is essential. From five loaves of bread and two fish comes a simple yet abundant meal that feeds five thousand with twelve baskets left over. The story enfleshes, in a way, a theme present in many parables, especially the parable of the mustard seed: "the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matt. 13:31-32). There is a principle of abundance here, a fruitful matrix which characterizes the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus' life and work.

I do not view the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand as proof of Jesus unique divinity. Rather, we must bear in mind his assertion that "very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these" (Jn. 14:12).

Now, I want to look a bit more closely at the problem illustrated by Phillip. I came across a quote by Albert Einstein recently which I think helps illuminate the problem.

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

As Borg and Crossan say, the modern Western mind is excessively concerned with factuality, and thus the rational mind. Intuition is, as Einstein said, ignored. Intuition is essential to creativity—whether it be in the sciences, the arts, or the humanities—or in the feeding of the hungry.

Intuition accounts for leaps of understanding, the problem solved in sleep, the break through which comes out of the blue. It requires preparation, yes, but mostly waiting, receptivity, even emptiness. Certainly, it requires sensitivity. The seminal psychologist Carl Jung called intuition perception through the medium of the unconscious.

It is not subject to the laws of the time space realm, the way the Spirit is not. We learn of things, for example, in a dream before news of them comes to us. Intuition defies understanding or explanation, and so if we depend excessively on the rational mind, we tend to dismiss it.

I think there is a link between the intuitive mind, which touches the realm of mystery, and the fruitfulness of the Kingdom of Heaven, illustrated by the parable of the mustard seed and by the feeding of the five thousand. In our Psalm we read, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” I think that this is to say, they deny Mystery, they get stuck in the rational mind and its limitations, its paradigm of scarcity.

They deny mystery, the matrix of the unconscious and its miraculous fruitfulness. This fruitfulness is not “only spiritual,” is not separate from our physical world and our bodily needs. It feeds the 5,000. It flows into us and through us addressing the problems we wrestle with in the world today. (The psalmist goes on to say to these fools, “You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.” The Hebrew word for Lord is YHWH, a word that cannot be pronounced, because we cannot articulate this

mystery, cannot grasp it with the thinking, limiting, naming mind. It remains—this mystery which is the refuge for the poor—in some way unconscious, unknowable, and thus unutterable.)

So, Jesus taps into this matrix, this mysterious fruitfulness of The Kingdom of Heaven. Kayla McClurg recently posted a passage from one of Gordon Cosby's sermons on [inward/outward](#) that speaks to this:

God is a creator. God's being, God's life is the source of all that is.

God is constantly bringing into being that which was not, that which is new. Newness is constantly breaking forth in God, through God. The flow of energy in life continues. The flow is limitless—will never give out.

Coming from the limitless depths of God's being, the flow is infinite, inexhaustible. So you don't have to husband your resources and dribble them out. You can be lavish and prodigal. You will be embarrassed by the new riches being poured into your life.

Don't you know there is a limitless flow of life—a superabundance of love and caring? You simply cannot exhaust it. It may be tough learning how to touch that current, how to get into that stream, to feel the flow and power of it, to be carried by it, but one thing is certain: the stream is there. And it is limitless.

(N. Gordon Cosby, posted on Inward/Outward on 6/30/12)

We have witnessed the fruitfulness of this stream in our corporate life. We can only stand back in humble awe when we look at the ministries that have grown and multiplied out of the Church of the Saviour—not awe at our ability, but at God's fruitfulness, at what has flowed through us. So this is not

an abstract concept, this fruitfulness, but something we experience daily, and we can see in concrete forms all around us.

Now, immediately after the feeding of the five thousand, we have this image of the disciples crossing the sea at night.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Now the sea, which is a central image in the Gospels, can be viewed on one level as a symbol of the unconscious. The unconscious can be both fruitful, and terrifying—and terrifying for its very fruitfulness. The disciples are caught in a storm on the sea, their deep fears are perhaps whipped up and threatening to swamp them, and then they are terrified by the image of Jesus walking on the water... But to Jesus, this medium is not terrifying, is not devouring. He walks on it as on solid ground, and as he reaches them the disciples are transported abruptly to safety. It is a dream like passage, and dreams are, of course, from the unconscious.

Let us dwell for a moment on the symbolism of the sea, and its contents, fish. One way to understand fish symbolically, is as the living contents of the unconscious. There are a number of passages in the Gospels where the disciples are fishing but catching nothing, and then with Jesus' direction they catch nets full to bursting, and they recognize Jesus in this moment—sometimes with joy, sometimes with terror. He is a master of the living contents of the unconscious. And he is eventually symbolized for some by the fish. The Christian

symbol of the fish, like two curved lines drawn in the sand, is part of a mandorla. A mandorla is an image of two circles overlapping slightly, so that there is an almond shape where they overlap. It is a symbolic representation of the intersection between the two worlds, heaven and earth, spiritual and physical, conscious and unconscious. And this place where the two realms overlap, or intersect makes the fish that for some symbolizes Christ, the fish that is at home in the sea and all it represents.

Evelyn Underhill, the great mystic Christian writer, expounds upon the image of the fish. She says:

Mystics, trying to tell us of their condition, often say that they feel 'sunk in God like a fish in the sea.' We pass over these phrases very easily, and forget that they are the final result of a long struggle to find the best image for an admittedly imageless truth. Yet prayer is above all the act in which we give ourselves to our soul's true Patria [founder; stronghold]; enter again that Ocean of God which is at once our origin and our inheritance, and there find ourselves mysteriously at home.

This strange, home-like feeling kills the dread which might overcome us, if we thought of the unmeasured depth beneath us, and the infinite extent and utter mystery of that Ocean into which we have plunged. As it is, a curious blend of confidence and entire abandonment keep us, because of our very littleness, in peace and joy: content with our limited powers and the limitless Love in which we are held.

Nothing in all nature is so lovely and so vigorous, so perfectly at home in its environment, as a fish in the sea. Its surroundings give to it a beauty, quality, and power which is not its own. We take it out, and at once a poor, limp dull thing, fit for nothing, is gasping away its life. So the soul sunk in God, living the life of prayer, is supported, filled, transformed in beauty, by a vitality and a

power which are not its own. The souls of the saints are so powerful because they are thus utterly immersed in the Spirit: their whole life is a prayer.

– From “The Golden Sequence”, collected in Lent With Evelyn Underhill, edited by G.P. Mellick Belshaw.

So, Underhill develops the sea and the fish as symbols of God and the mystic, the person of prayer. And she names prayer as our way of immersing ourselves in the ocean of God.

I hope I have not gone too far afield, but I feel that all of this is connected—at least, my intuitive mind connects it.

The symbolic dimensions of the scriptures constantly open before us, and we will never fully exhaust them. And these dimensions are not a distraction leading us away from the concrete problems of the world, but rather a fruitful matrix, a creative realm that contains exactly what the world hungers for, both spiritually and physically.

How do we strengthen our knowledge of and connection to this realm? For one thing, we need to be wary of our cultural tendency to rely too much on the rational mind and to ignore the sacred gift of intuition. We need to cultivate a consciousness that is at ease with parabolic and symbolic language. We need to practice the patience, stillness and openness of prayer, the way Jesus withdrew again and again into the wilderness to pray. We need to live with the stories, insights, images, parables and symbols of the scriptures and the mystics. We need to learn from each other in community, from the unconscious as it speaks to us in dreams, from the events and synchronicities of our lives... We need to be open to mystery, and to constantly cultivate this openness.

Let us close with Paul’s words, which address this question of how we connect with this fruitful matrix, the Kingdom of Heaven, the ocean of God. He speaks to the need to strengthen

the inner being—intuition and feeling, perhaps—a need greater than ever in our time, our “information age.”

For this reason I bow my knees before God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

John 6:1-21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six

months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.