

Proper 12 Year B 2012

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish”

I remember during my early teenage years, which would be the late sixties...I remember my mother leading a Bible study at the city jail...these were the days of the Jesus movement, the so-called renewal movement and my mother was all into it...sometimes to our, my brothers and my embarrassment...but still she was afire to make this Jesus known in the world around her...her spirituality I must say was a chief, pervasive and persuasive narrative in our family....she has mellowed over the years...she just turned eighty...but perhaps mellowed is a poor choice of words...I think that she has matured persistently over the years into a more profound spirituality.

Back in the day though, through her work at the city jail, she met an inmate destined for prison for armed robbery and discovered that his family, his wife and four children, were living in abject squalor...the house out in the country had no electricity and was infested with rats....A friend of my parents had just completed a section 8 housing project (a new concept then), and my mother and father were able to help them procure a two bedroom apartment with electricity and a modern kitchen.

My mother over the years helped this family....mostly in small ways... she would occasionally take them to the doctor...she would give Hazel, the mother, advice over the phone...I'm sure from time to time she bought them groceries.... They came to our house for supper a few times.... My mother helped them register for school....small things...after a few years the father Peyte died mysteriously in prison....Hazel had serious psychological issues....the children began getting into trouble....two of the three girls had babies early in high school....young Peyte by the age of twenty had been arrested at least three times that I know of....my mother bailed him out at least once....I bailed him out another time....one of the girls became a drug user and died of AIDS just three years ago.

And eventually my mother in her weak moments would lament that all of her work for this family was in vain....she felt useless and betrayed... It got to where when Hazel would call, my mother wouldn't speak to her... Hazel died years ago as well....and over the years the children would from time to time call my mother usually because they were in some kind of trouble...each time my mother would lament that she should have done more for them....that she had failed in her noble and perhaps naïve

enterprise of enabling a life of dignity for this family....until just a few weeks ago.

Young Peyte whom she hadn't seen for several years came by her house....my mother thought he was in some kind of trouble....He let her know that he was in the house painting business and his son was working with him....that he had made enough money to buy a house....that he had plenty of work....He was paying the way for his son to go to the local junior college....He came by because he wanted to paint my mother's house for free....because of...as he put it...how good she had been to his family....he is painting her house as we speak...the one condition being that he allow my mother to pay him a fair price....On that visit he told my mother about his sisters' children as well....Sharon, the one who died of AIDS...her two children joined the military...one has been decorated for bravery...one of the other sisters has a child on scholarship at Auburn...the other is an assistant manager at Wendy's....all of this third generation either are in school or have jobs or both....My mother's call to me just a couple of weeks ago was simply to say....well maybe all these small things I did for them helped after all.

That is a story of God's grace....just as our gospel reading for today is a story of God's grace...a story of small things...five loaves and two fish...which when shared become the means of God's extravagant grace...small in the giving and exponentially abundant in the receiving...that is the first law of God's commonweal...a realm in which grace and dignity reign supreme... a realm in which small acts of sacrifice and hospitality and kindness and mercy have ramifications beyond our imagining....In our reading today Jesus rejects being crowned an earthly king, because in that world, the world of empire, the laws are utterly different, quite the opposite...in that world might makes right; the wealthy get wealthier... while the poor and marginalized suffer for dignity...It is a world that lives in fear of scarcity....It is a world of violence....Later in this gospel Jesus will tell Pilate that his kingdom is not that world....In his kingdom, the commonweal of God all have enough....all live as equals in a just society at peace with one another...and the means of effecting such a world are the small things...the small acts of sacrifice...of offering dignity to the stranger who is our neighbor...to make friends of enemies....to simply forgive...to feed...to heal...to simply work to sustain life as it should be through our small and meager hands....many times, perhaps most times, we can't see the fruits of this work; sometimes the work comes to fruition after generations... but this mundane work we must do in order to let God loose in the world... To set God's grace in motion comes from each and every act of sacrifice.

This gospel, the Gospel of John, is mostly concerned with Christology... that is, it seeks to understand and proclaim Christ's true nature... After this particular passage, the scribes of John will go on and in rhapsodic reverie proclaim Jesus himself as the very bread from heaven that sustains the world... a way of living that sustains the life God intends for us... Jesus for John is the very center of the universe from which God's love flows into the world... but in this story there is a subtlety that I don't want us to miss... just on the periphery of the story is the boy who has five barley loaves and two fish... and he is the one who chooses to share his food with the others... It is his small act of sacrifice of hospitality that makes way for this incredible scene of abundance. Without that boy's sacrifice there would have been no feast. That boy is us... That boy is us.

Jesus tells us in this gospel that we are sent as he is sent... sent in small ways to the lost corners of our world; sent into the grind of the everyday, planting the seeds of love, as small as those seeds may be... and because of such work the world is transformed in ways beyond our reckoning... because the laws of God's kingdom are not the laws of the world... In God's world a mere act of love unleashes God's grace for all... and that brothers and sisters, you who bear the meager loaves and fish... that is no small thing.