

Proper 12 Year B 2024

I believe that the Spirit of God is always present; always on the move, always about bringing to reality the imagination of God.... We don't have to go looking for it. But there are times when the movement of the Spirit is more extroverted, if you will, than others. Perhaps it's in hindsight that we see. Maybe it's just about paying attention. One such time was about seventy years ago.... World War Two had ended, bringing to a close a catastrophe of violence never seen before in our world. The suffering of God must have been profound. But God persevered. In 1954, after six years of research, an obscure virologist working in a lab at the University of Pittsburg, discovered an effective vaccine that would immunize millions from Polio. A small thing... a solitary scientist in a lonely lab. In twenty five years Polio would be eradicated from the U.S. population. In that same decade two scientists in Mexico City identified a hormone which prevented pregnancies in lab animals resulting in the development of the birth control pill allowing women to have control of their reproductive lives. Feminism then found its voice; and that voice has changed our world. An average guitarist named Chuck Berry popularized the Blues using electronically amplified sound, and Rock and Roll was born, a liberated and colloquial expression of the art of music that informed a raucous generation. Rosa Parks defied the conventions of segregation and sat in the front of a bus where white people normally sat in Montgomery Alabama, and thus in 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed, giving black Americans equal stature under the law. Small things.... And in our own time.... In less than a year from its outbreak, American scientists created highly effective vaccines against the Covid-19 virus.... Small acts that propounded immeasurable Grace. And in

the precincts of the Church as well: In 1958 Guillermo Benetez, a Roman Catholic priest in El Salvador, refused to celebrate the Eucharist with his back to the people; and in 1964 at the second Vatican Council the Pope declared that all altars in the Church be moved off the walls, and that priests would preside over the Eucharist facing the people; and would pray in the peoples' own language... a small thing, but representative of a seismic theological shift in the church.... It was a shift from the transcendent, all powerful and aloof God of the Enlightenment, to the more ancient idea of God as immanent... present among us.... A God inherent in the created order; a God in relationship with God's people. A small thing.

Indeed throughout scripture, Old Testament and New, there is a decided tension between God's transcendence... the omnipotent God who is the Lord of the Cosmos, on the one hand... and God's immanence, the God who lives and moves among us, within us, on the other. The church, at least in late medieval and Modern times, has opted for the former, the transcendent God, the God so very distant from us so-called fallen people; the God who is ultimately unknowable, certainly unapproachable.... And safe. The church opted for a philosophical abstraction, bolstered by an intricate, if not clumsy, belief system... a belief system not to be questioned, much less understood.

Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst and anthropologist of the twentieth century mused that one of the pathologies of the Enlightenment was western society's inflated collective ego. The Enlightenment brought an infatuation with the human intellect and creativity. The self in our own eyes became God-like, grand, invincible.... And so did our notions of God... Grand, supernatural, larger than life... a projection of course.... But I

want to say today that there is a welcome shift in our understanding of God; an ancient memory perhaps... that God is seen and known among small things. Dorothee Sölle, a prominent 20th century feminist theologian wrote that “God’s transcendence is found in God’s radical immanence.” That the mystery of God can be known in the common things of earth; in small acts; in small decisions; in our waking and in our sleeping; in our relationships; in our lives, and in our deaths; in our exultation and in our despair... in our presence. Our post-modern problem is that we are looking for God as “other,” set apart from the created order... as some rarefied version of perfection; whatever that may mean.... But God is not about perfection... God is about presence.

Today’s gospel reading is about God’s immanence; God’s presence among us... a story of small, ordinary things... five loaves and two fish... which when shared become the means of God’s extravagant grace and abundance... small in the giving, and exponentially abundant in the receiving... that is the first law of God’s world... 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 contrary, quite the opposite to the ways of God... in the world of empire might makes right; the wealthy get wealthier... while the poor and marginalized suffer indignity and shame.... It is a world that lives in fear of scarcity, an illusion concocted by the powerful.... It is a world of exclusion, coercion, and violence.... Later in this gospel Jesus will tell Pilate that his kingdom is not that world.... In his kingdom, a society of mutual regard, all have enough... all live as equals in a just

society at peace with one another... and the means, 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 radical work we must do in order to let God loose in the world.... To set God's grace in motion, to honor and engender the very Spirit of God in the world... and it is sacrifice the means of such alchemy.

This gospel, the Gospel of John, is mostly concerned with Christology, "Christ knowledge.".... You remember the Prologue... a grand philosophical treatise as to God's presence in Christ in and for the world... that is, it seeks to understand and proclaim the Christ's true nature.... After this particular passage we just read, 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.... It is all so lofty and grand.... But this Gospel is equally about anthropology, that is to say, this Gospel is also about who we are as humans, Jesus the representation, the archetype. The figure of Jesus is our mythology, as it were. So I bid you to read between the lines, because in this story there is a subtlety that I don't want us to miss.... Just on the periphery of this famous account of the feeding of the five thousand is the boy who has five barley loaves and two fish... and he, out of generosity, 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. This is a story about the transforming power of generosity. Generosity in the flesh. This is not a story about Jesus performing a magic act; it is a story about the generous people of God. That boy is us, brothers and sisters.... We are the boy with five loaves and two fish. I imagine Jesus saying, not me.... It's the boy who is the bearer of God's abundance. In John's Gospel Jesus is only the Son of God to the extent that all of us are sons and daughters of God. Jesus will go on to say that his disciples are sent as he is sent. Jesus, for this writer, represents our very humanity made in the image of God, and therefore our vocation is all about the small things of compassion and kindness; generosity and justice. The church has spent its life setting Jesus apart; when in fact, we bear his very life, God's life to the world. So to find God, brothers and sisters, find your true self.

And then, as if an afterthought, the writer tells the story of Jesus walking on water... calming the sea, bringing the boat to the shore. He tells the terrified disciples, "It is I." Ego Ami.... The literal translation is "I am," the same words God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert. The life of God is deep within us, among us, moving over the face of the deep, now, as in the beginning, shaping with imaginative art the creation still in its becoming. But it is more than I am... It is *we are*.

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 know brothers and sisters, you who share the meager loaves and fish, you who bring to your sister, your brother just what you can give.... That is the work of the Spirit, the Spirit of God ever on the move... and that, good people, is no small thing.