**July 26, 2015 – 9th Sunday after Pentecost**

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This weekend I was watching a really interesting show on PBS called Humanity from Space. It talked about changes in civilization from nomadic groups of hunter gatherers to where we are today, and some of the dramatic shifts caused by human invention. One of the things it focused on was movement of civilization and trade goods because of innovations in transportation and communication.

Near the end of the program was a pretty frightening section on population growth. We are now up to 7.3 billion people on earth, and growing at a rate of 173 thousand people a day, or a little over 46 million a year. At this rate, Earth’s population will be over 9 billion by the year 2040. Yikes.

After laying that fun little statistic on the viewers, the film went on to discuss the problem of feeding all of those people in the years to come. It talked about alternative methods of growing crops, like vertical agriculture, where crops are grown indoors in stacks, with artificial lighting and recycled water. It also talked about specialized crop breeding and genetic modification to increase yields. It covered several new ideas, but it never really answered the question, “How are we going to feed all of these people?”

This is the same question that Jesus asks Philip in today’s Gospel. There’s a big difference, though. In the PBS film, the narrators don’t know the answer. In fact, no one really knows how we’re going to cope with another 2 billion people when we’re already having trouble with starvation in today’s world. But in the Gospel story, Jesus knows the answer. In fact, Jesus IS the answer.

Today is the first of five readings from Chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. They all circle around the all-important statement of Jesus – “I am the Bread of Life.”

Today we hear John’s version of the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle that’s in all four Gospels. Picking up from last week’s Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus and the disciples are still tacking back and forth across the Sea of Galilee and the crowds are still following them around on land. But John’s version has a couple of wrinkles that aren’t found in the other versions.

The first wrinkle found only in John’s version is that Jesus gives out the food himself rather than handing it to his disciples to be distributed. It will become more clear why this is important as we move through this chapter in the next four weeks, so keep it in the back of your mind.

The other wrinkle exclusive to John is that after they land and head up to a hillside to rest, Jesus looks down at the large crowd gathering below him and says to Philip, “So, Phil. Where are we going to buy bread for all these folks?” The text goes on to say that Jesus was testing Philip, although he doesn’t say what he’s testing him for. Perhaps he’s testing Philip’s faith in Jesus’ ability to do miracles. Or, since it’s around the Passover, maybe he’s testing Philip’s understanding of the Torah, where God sends manna into the wilderness for the Israelites to eat.

Whatever the test is for, Philip doesn’t do very well. In fact, he doesn’t even answer the question that Jesus asks. “Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get even a little,” he says. You can just hear the panic in his voice. “It’s obvious that Jesus wants us to feed all these people, but we have so little ourselves. And even if we had six months’ wages, it wouldn’t be enough. What are we supposed to do?”

Then Andrew pipes up helpfully that there is a boy with a little food – just a few loaves and a couple of fish – but hardly enough to even begin to feed such a mob. What could they possibly do with that? They might get angry and demand more – perhaps even taking their anger out on the disciples!

There’s a picture floating around of the statue of the weeping Jesus that’s at the Oklahoma City bombing memorial, and in the manner of the Internet, it has become a meme with the caption, “And Jesus did Facepalm.” I can maybe see Jesus doing that here and going, “Never mind guys. Just give me the food and tell everyone to sit down. Sigh…”

Philip and Andrew are just like us. We talk about miracles, and we might even experience something unusual that could be described as miraculous once or twice in our lifetimes, but we don’t really expect miracles. The truth is, a lot of times we don’t really expect God to come through for us. Maybe that was Philip’s test – to see if he had faith in Jesus to solve the problem of feeding that crowd, even if he, himself, couldn’t imagine how it would come about.

I know I find myself in a weird place here. I truly DO believe in miracles, just as I say I do. But when I’m praying for someone who’s desperately ill, or who is in trouble, I find myself holding back just a little, to hedge my bets in case the miracle I say I believe in doesn’t happen. Or I find myself trying to make excuses for God. Well, God works in mysterious ways. Or, we can’t understand it now, but it will be clear in God’s time.

I think my problem is the same as the disciples on that hillside. They are rooted in their moment in time and space and can’t see beyond the solutions that their time and space can offer. It seems to be human nature to try to put limits on God, but God is so much bigger than that! You’d think that after all the healings and miracles that Philip had seen Jesus perform, the first answer to the question of where they would buy bread would be, “We don’t have to buy bread, Lord. We believe that you’ll provide it.” THAT should be the kind of faith we all strive for.

Another thing to notice is that this miracle is not like Santa Claus bring prezzies down the chimbly at Christmas. Jesus could have probably produced food out of nowhere but he didn’t. Instead he used the food his disciples offered him – all that they had, in fact. That’s an important part of this story. As I said, I truly believe that God can do miracles without our help. But part of each miracle is the effect it has on everyone who witnesses it – not just the person healed, but everyone around it. And how much more would that mean to us if we had given all we had to God and God had used it in miraculous ways?

In some ways every time we give of ourselves, whether it’s time, talent, or treasure, we are taking part in a miracle. Sometimes that miracle is just a small opening up of someone’s heart to God. Sometimes it’s saving someone’s life.

One of Jesus’ messages throughout the entire Gospel of John is that everything he does, including the miracles he performs and up to and including the final miracle of the Resurrection, is to reveal the glory of God. In today’s miracle, Jesus includes the disciples.

How would we be transformed if we looked at every act of ministry we did together as a congregation as a miracle Jesus shares with us in order to glorify God? What would it look like if we gave everything we possibly could back to God and then trusted him to share it with those who need it most, and still have enough left over?

I think not only would five thousand, or even more, be fed, but we would find ourselves being fed, too. It was a miracle that that huge crowd was satisfied, but it was also a miracle that the disciples, who had given all they had, ended up with far more than they started out with. We could live with that.

Amen.