

Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
July 26, 2009, 17th Sun. Ord. Time

Jesus Takes Charge

Today's Gospel lesson contains two separate and familiar stories. They are the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the sea. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. John records a shorter version of Jesus walking on the sea, omitting Christ calling Peter to come to Him on the water.

The crowds continue to follow Christ because they see what He does for the sick and the miracles He performs. They find Jesus on the mountain with His disciples, eager to spend all the time He can with these men. Jesus deals with this great crowd of people while being very conscious they are hungry, both for His message and for His healing. Christ is also aware He will soon become the ultimate sacrifice.

Jesus seems eager to welcome these people who travel great distances, often by foot, to see Him and to be healed by Him. He knows how He will provide for their need of a meal, even though His disciples can only point out the few resources available. It is appropriate that Jesus asks Philip where they could buy bread because Philip is from nearby Bethsaida. Philip answers that all the money they can gather, the equivalent of 200 days wages at 15 cents a day (\$30.00 roughly), would hardly provide even a small amount for each person. Then Andrew brings a young boy to Jesus who has five barley loaves and two fish. A barley loaf is the bread eaten by the very poor, and the fish are not much more than large minnows. No wonder Andrew asks "But what are they among so many people."

Now Jesus takes over! He tells the disciples to have the people sit down, like a great family invited to a huge feast, except there is no white tablecloth. There is simply much grass to recline on. As Jesus accepts the boy's food, He give thanks. In the mystery of that blessing, the small becomes great. They all receive as much as they want. With Jesus, there is always enough ... and more! What a lesson in God's powerful, gracious provision for these timid, hesitant disciples who are now given the honor of bringing this meal out to the people sitting on the hillside. Then Jesus asks the disciples to gather up the remaining fragments which have not been eaten.

In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus Christ gives sacred meaning to the daily bread which graces our tables. Without Christ, we simply satisfy our physical appetites as we thoughtlessly gulp down whatever we can pick up at some fast food place. We often carelessly throw out whatever is not eaten, filling countless garbage cans with our leftovers while two-thirds of the people of our world fiercely struggle for enough scraps to stay alive.

This meal on the hillside is a sign of the eating and drinking which becomes a memorial of Jesus' sacrificial death. That "Last Supper" is to be a covenant, or a promise, that the offering of Christ's body and blood, which seems so unimportant to these not-yet believers, is God's gift for the world's salvation. Again, what seems so little becomes so much.

The crowds respond to this sign by insisting Christ must truly be "the Prophet who is to come into the world," the return of Elijah or one greater. It is their belief that this new prophet will give them permanent physical

security, full stomachs, and instant healing, and will supply all their bodily needs. So they decide to make Him their king!

But Jesus has dealt with this temptation before, when Satan asks Jesus to prove Himself by turning stones into bread or calling down a legion of angels, which would draw a huge following quickly. Jesus Christ wants no parts of this! So He simply walks away from the crowd to be alone again. Jesus comes to call people to a radical, costly discipleship, not a kingdom of bread. Jesus Christ will be king only of those who enter by the narrow door of spiritual surrender.

Two themes run through John's story of the feeding. First is the lesson taught to the disciples about not understanding the power of Jesus Christ. Both Philip and Andrew only see the meager resources for a large crowd of people. Christ does not scold them for their views and disbelief. Instead, Jesus takes charge of the situation, gives instructions to the disciples, gives thanks, and distributes the loaves and fish Himself. Then He asks His disciples to gather the leftovers, enough to fill twelve baskets. Jesus Christ redefines what is possible.

A second theme deals with the shallow response of the crowds. They follow Jesus because of the marvelous signs He does. But we, as readers, already know Jesus is suspicious of those who are captivated only by the miracles He performs. Even though Jesus is in control, the crowd is really only interested in what He can do for them as a healer and someone to give them a free lunch. This kind of thinking distorts the reality of grace and diminishes Christ's power. It reverses our glorifying God forever to

receiving the glory which belongs to God. Such thinking causes Christ to retreat, then and now.

The disciples seem baffled by Jesus' reaction. Why would He walk away from a great opportunity to encourage so many new disciples if He were really serious about His new kingdom movement? But they let Him go off alone, agreeing to meet Him later.

So the disciples get into their boat and push out across the sea; but they soon find themselves in a predicament. At this point, I am reminded of a story I heard. A minister, a priest, and a rabbi are fishing in a boat in a lake, not too far from the shore. They have been out a couple hours when the minister realizes he has forgotten his water bottle. He gets up, steps out of the boat, walks across the water to the shore, gets his water, and returns to the boat. The rabbi looks absolutely shocked while the priest says nothing. A little while later, the priest realizes he has left his lunch on the shore. As does the minister, the priest steps out of the boat, walks across the water, gets his lunch, and returns to the boat. The rabbi is totally stunned and thinks to himself, if they can walk on the water, surely being every bit as religious as they are, I should be able to walk on the water by faith too. So he gets up, steps out of the boat and immediately begins flailing in the water. The minister and priest see the rabbi does not swim well, and come to his rescue. As they reach out to assist the rabbi, the minister says to the priest, "Do you think we should tell him where the underwater rock path is?!"

The disciples have a different problem. For them, darkness, a violent wind, and a heavy sea are suddenly about to overwhelm them. And Jesus is not

with them! What a picture of our contemporary existence: terrifying problems which defy any human solution, the breakdown of our main human relationships, violence and anger becoming more and more the disorder of the day, while a sense of hopelessness and despair seem to paralyze the human spirit. Everything seems out of control. It is a dark and stormy night at sea. There does not seem to be anyone in the boat who can save us!

But in the midst of this violent Galilean storm, a barely visible figure is seen walking on the water toward their boat. How strange! John writes, “and they were terrified.” Maybe they should have waited on the shore with the crowd. Then they hear it. They hear the strong, familiar voice, “It is I, do not be afraid.” And they eagerly receive Christ into their boat. Again, Jesus takes charge!

Jesus gives His disciples, and us, the powerful assurance of His presence. He gives to them and us all the meaning the words “It is I” can have, no matter how dark or stormy our days or nights may become. It is because of who Christ is that He is welcomed into the boat, and they immediately find themselves on the shore. Christ’s presence will always bring us to our destination in His own time and His own way.

Christ assures us through feeding the five thousand and us. He feeds us our daily bread and fish together with His covenant body and blood in communion and Scriptures. He assures us through His presence in all the rough seas, heavy winds, as weary rowers in every dark and stormy trial we encounter. Jesus will never leave us. May we always look to Jesus for the

assurance He gives us in Scripture and in communion with us in prayer and in worship. May we encourage those around us to turn to Jesus, as we do, in good times and bad, in darkness and light, in terror and peace, and in death and life, knowing Jesus Christ is always in control and always takes charge!
Amen.