



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 13)

August 4, 2002

Isaiah 55:1–5

Ps 145:8–9, 14–21

Romans 9:1–5

Matthew 14:13–21

Jesus has just heard that his cousin, John the Baptist has been beheaded, and so he gets into a boat so he can go to some deserted spot to be by himself. The crowds, however, won't let him alone, but follow along the shoreline to where he's going. Jesus, being moved to compassion by their trust, comes ashore and goes among the crowd, healing those who are sick.

Doubtless this has been a depressing day for the disciples too, so when evening comes, they are, naturally, tired and surly. Make this riff-raff go away, they say to Jesus. Tell them... tell them they need to go into town and buy food and eat. Tell them to go fend for themselves. Enough is enough.

Jesus has other ideas. They need not go away, he says. You disciples, you give them something to eat. Oh yeah, right, they think. All we've got is five loaves of bread and two dried fish—not enough even for us to eat. Likely one or two of the disciples at this point feel like decking Jesus—and when Jesus says to bring the five loaves and the two fish to him, at least a couple of these tired and dispirited fishermen must feel like throwing the whole lot in his face and stomping off in disgust. Enough of the teacher's loony nonsense. There are five thousand men in this crowd—along with wives, children, widows, and who knows what other oddballs. The crowd must be close to twenty thousand in reality. Even if she had the best caterer in the whole world, Martha Stewart herself wouldn't try to feed a mob like this.

But then you know how the story goes. Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to them. All twenty thousand of them eat and are filled. And there are leftovers.

Industrious modern minds want to know, Did it really happen? Well, there are lots of "explanations" of the feeding of the five thousand men plus women and children. The most popular of these says that people were so moved by Jesus' generosity that they brought forth the food they had hidden in their clothing or travel pouches, and it was discovered that by sharing, there was sufficient food for all. Now isn't that sweet? Frankly, this so-called explanation makes me want to puke. It reduces Jesus, and by extension, God, to just another *fabulous* motivational speaker—albeit, better than most. The other nausea-inducing explanation is that the meal was symbolic and spiritual. It was not *physical* hunger but *spiritual* hunger that was satisfied when each of the twenty thousand received a miniscule, miniscule fragment of the shared food.

Oh, give me a break. Neither of these explanations do justice to the story in the Gospels, which *intend* to report a *supernatural* event, an event contrary to nature, an event that tells us that when Jesus is present, the laws of nature and necessity are going to get broken. The story means to say that when Jesus is present, common-sense equations such as "five loaves of bread and two dried fishes are a poor appetizer even for a few" are out the window. The story means to say that when Jesus is present, all bets are off. When Jesus is present, all of our explanations, all of our ways of knowing, everything that we call reality will be made to look quite unreal after all. It's a law of nature that when you're dead, you're dead—but when Jesus is present, look out—perhaps even the dead do rise. The Gospel means to say, that with Jesus present, very, very strange things, completely beyond our control will and do happen.

So fasten your seatbelts my brothers and sisters. Jesus is about to be present among you – bread and wine is about to become the very real body and blood of Christ Jesus given and shed for you. And with Jesus truly present, with Jesus within your very bodies, who knows what will occur.

Of course science, common sense, and American rational religion say that all talk of the real presence of Christ in bread and wine is hocus-pocus and nothing much will really happen here today or any day, but the Gospel says otherwise. The Gospel says that with Jesus present, the laws of nature, necessity, and psychology no longer hold true. So approach the altar with awe and wonder, with reverence, and perhaps even fear. For who knows—with Jesus truly present as the Gospel promises, we might just shed our apathy to the plight of the environment and go away from the altar to care for the earth and all its creatures as God intended. Who knows, with Jesus present, we might become less concerned with ourselves and our possessions—and more concerned with the poor, and we might just start giving generously—no extravagantly—without counting the cost. Who knows, with Jesus present, bit by bit our mourning may be turned to joy so that we can delight in the pleasures of God's good creation. Who knows, with Jesus present, we might just repent of our prejudice, our racism, and even our own self-loathing and begin to love the neighbor as ourselves, no matter who we are or who the neighbor is. Who knows, with Jesus present, we might finally set aside our petty criticisms, our bickering, and our fears, and truly love one another—for what we are—while we yet have the time. With Jesus present, only God knows what will happen. But know this: Jesus is truly present and something, something very strange and not natural, something far beyond your control will happen and neither you nor the cosmos will ever be quite the same again. This is the Holy Gospel.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.