

Proper 13, Pentecost XII August 3, 2008

Last week I preached about the pearl of great price, and part of what I talked about was the cost of the pearl, and the difference between an investment and a total commitment. (Remember the chicken and the pig?) All of that was a way of saying that the kingdom requires of us what the pearl required of the merchant: a total investment of our selves—no hedges, no partial financing; just everything we have.

The story we just heard about the feeding of the five thousand begins where the pearl of great price stops. It talks about this total commitment, but it adds to that some good news; a promise and some hope. Listen to part of the story again, but this time, try to hear it from the disciples' point of view. Imagine yourself as one of them, or as all of them.

When it was evening, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And Jesus said, "Bring them here to me."

Now, how does that request sound? Really? After all, unlike the crowds, the disciples had the foresight to bring their own lunch. If the crowd didn't have enough sense to do something as simple as that, how could the disciples be responsible? So, if Jesus were bothered by this, well, *he* could fix it. He could send the crowd home, or he could share *his* lunch, or he could pull a rabbit out of his own hat, or something. Either way, the disciples should have been out of it. Instead, Jesus asked for what *they* had. For all of it.

Notice what Jesus didn't say: He didn't say, "bring me a couple of loaves and one fish", or "bring me what you can spare". He didn't say "bring me what's left over after you've paid your taxes and eaten." The cost for the disciples was the same as the cost for the pearl merchant. It was everything.

No doubt, the disciples had intended to hold on to those loaves and fish; and put them to personal use. They were hungry, after all, and while that little bit of fish and bread wasn't much compared to the needs of the crowd, it was really quite a bit compared to the nothing they would have without it.

Be sure to notice these two very important things about that bread and those fish. The first was that it wasn't much. A loaf was about fist size, flat—a few mouths full at best. The fish were just a few inches long. This is not what we would consider abundance; it's ordinary stuff, bare subsistence for them; no luxury here. That was the first thing.

The second was that it was all they had. Now, that will pretty quickly make not much become *real* significant. It was everything. All of the loaves; all of the fish. | | Not much. Everything. Those were the important things, and if one of them didn't keep the disciples from sharing, then the other one almost certainly would.

The more I read this story, the more I am convinced that if any one of these disciples had taken one chunk of that bread, or one half of one of the fish, and stuck it in his back pocket (or in whatever counted for back pockets in those days), if just one had done that, the miracle would not have happened. (And the fish would have gone bad real quick.) One disciple trying to save just a little for himself would have ruined the whole deal. I am convinced of that. In the face of such an action, Jesus would have stood there powerless.

Four and a half loaves were not nearly enough. Five were enough because they were all they had. There's only one price for the pearl; and it's non-negotiable. But it's very hard, and very scary, and it just doesn't seem right to go to those extremes. Even when Jesus asks. So there is that to deal with. The price of the pearl.

But the other side is that there was enough. Somehow there really was. Even when all there was to start with was so very little ordinary stuff, there was enough, and to spare. That's the promise. That's the guarantee. That's what can draw us forward and entice us and attract us even at the price.

When that little bit of very ordinary stuff was offered to Jesus, when it was taken, blessed, and broken by him, then what was given back was much more than could be imagined. It was enough. It still is.

Whatever little bits of ordinary stuff they had—whatever little bits of ordinary stuff *we* have—when all of it is all offered, when all of it is shaped and transformed by the hands of Jesus—then, somehow, there will be enough. And there is reason to hope, and there is cause for joy.

To offer ourselves, our souls and our bodies, whatever we may have, this is to make an offering that is pleasing in God's sight—whoever we are, and whatever we may think of ourselves or of the stuff of our lives. What we offer, when we offer ourselves, this will be enough. When shaped and transformed by the hands of Christ, it will be enough for whatever God needs us for. It will be enough for the mission on which we are sent and the ministry to which we are called—both as individuals, and as St. Nicholas' parish. The loaves and fishes, which are we ourselves, which seem so small and so ordinary, these will be enough for all we can imagine and more. By the hands of Christ, it will be enough now, and forever.

We act this out every time we celebrate the Eucharist—and all the feeding stories in the New Testament are also stories about the Eucharist. We bring our loaves and fishes—the bread and the wine and the stuff in the plates—and we offer that as symbols of all of ourselves. Every bit of ourselves. This is why the Prayer Book insists that the Offering plates go on the Altar along with the bread and the wine.

Everything is offered, so everything can be touched, and molded, and transformed by the power of Jesus.

And then, like the folks on that hillside in Palestine, we come forward with empty hands to receive back from what we have given. And we go out that door and into our lives and our world to offer again what we have received; what we have offered in here. And in doing that we become again like the disciples. Remember, it was the disciples who fed the crowd.

It was the disciples who distributed to the crowds what came from Jesus' hands. The Church, the body of Christ, offers itself to the Lord, and we receive back into our hands the body of Christ, and that happens so we can become bread for the world. So we can be for the world what Jesus has been for us; so we can distribute as well as give.

What the disciples had was not much, but it was everything. And it was no doubt hard to let go of that, even when Jesus asked.

But it was enough; enough for them and enough for the rest.