

Sermon: Pentecost 10B July 28, 2024

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preaching

2 Kgs 4:42-44, Eph. 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

Wow! Today's readings are packed with enough miracles to provide a Hollywood scriptwriter plenty of material for a Biblical film spectacle that would rival Cecil B. Demille's "The Ten Commandments." In the first reading we hear how the prophet Elisha fed one hundred people with twenty loaves of bread and **still** managed to have left overs. Then the gospel tells how Jesus fed 5000 with just **five** barley loaves...and two fish...and still had 12 baskets of leftovers. Oh, and then...can you top this?! -- Jesus walks on water! What a batch of miracles!

Of course, which of **us** hasn't longed for or prayed for a miracle at one time or another? Perhaps to bolster our weak faith...though I don't think we'd adopt the tone of King Herod's song in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, taunting Jesus to show him a thing or two to provoke him to faith. Maybe you remember those lyrics:

Prove to me that you're no fool.

Walk across my swimming pool.

Or

Prove to me that you're divine.

Change my water into wine.

That's all you need do

Then I'll know it's all true

C'mon King of the Jews.

But seriously, **any** of us might long for and pray for a miracle for something that seems hopeless, a cure for an illness labeled incurable, a world without war or where hundreds of thousands no longer die of starvation every single day. But as one of our hymns puts it:

Still your children wander homeless;

Still the hungry cry for bread;

Still the captives long for freedom;

Still in grief we mourn our dead.

So where, we might ask, is the feeder of five thousand when we **need** him? Where is the one who promised to give us a peace that the world **cannot** give? We'll come back to that question in a few minutes, but first let me direct your attention to the **other** reading for this Sunday, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a lesson that on the surface certainly doesn't **appear** to be a miracle story, but that promises, I think, the **biggest** miracle of all. That portion of Ephesians is a **prayer**, a prayer that God would come to dwell more and more in our hearts, in our inner being, transforming me, transforming you, and empowering us **all** to be more and more fully God's people.

Why, you may be asking, would it be such a miracle for us to be more fully transformed, to be more fully **conformed** to Jesus at the very center of our beings? Maybe because **outside** us, constantly pulling us, are the lures of the world, the ways of the world, the advertising slogans of the world, the political mantras and dog whistles that lead us over **here** while God is calling us over **there**....and all the while **inside us** there is an echo of St. Augustine's ancient plea, "Change me, O God, but not yet, **not now**." Because if you're like me...and like the rest of us, it often feels too inconvenient or too hard to shape **our** will and **our** way to **God's** will and **Jesus'** way. We don't like to be stretched.

But **then** come the words from Ephesians that are frankly so powerful that the **rest** of today's sermon needs to be a **rereading** of that text...with some brief comments interspersed. Paul begins...

For this reason I kneel before Abba God, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

Paul's prayer is a prayer for **transformation**, a prayer for **every** human family, however it's constituted, and that means also **this** family, the Peace family. Paul longs for us to see that if I am to be transformed, I need the strength of this **community**. And if **you** are to be transformed, you need the **rest** of us. It isn't obvious in the English, but in the Greek, every "you" in this prayer is **plural**. So you see, we're all in this **together**...by God's design.

Then Paul goes on: *And I pray that God will strengthen you inwardly with power through the working of the Spirit.*

You see, it's our **inner** being, the very core of who we are, that needs to change, to **grow** in and into God. It's not that the world **outside** our hearts isn't important – the world of hunger and strife. But our life in the world, lived 24/7, is changed only when **we** are changed.

So Paul prays that we may be **strengthened through God's Spirit**. "Strengthened" means being given **more** strength. It's not that we started this day or entered church this morning with **no** spiritual strength, asking God to bring us from zero to 60 in 5 seconds. We **already** have God's strength, because it comes from God's Spirit, received at baptism, dwelling **already** in our inner being. But Paul prays that we might **grow** in that strength, freely given by the Spirit. And the **hope** is that every day of our lives might incarnate, make real, make alive this prayer which also forms part of a Pentecost hymn:

*Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord,
With all your graces now outpoured
On each believer's mind and heart;
Your fervent love to them impart.*

And then Paul's prayer continues:

May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, will be able to grasp fully the breadth, length, height and depth of Christ's love....

To have Christ **dwell** in our hearts through faith – **that's** what the whole thing's about. Really, that's all there is or **needs** to be. At the end of his gospel John tells us **why** he wrote about the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water and the water into wine, saying: *"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that believing you may have life in his name."*

In John's gospel the **ultimate** sign of God's love is Jesus' death on the cross: *"When I am lifted up,"* he says, *"I shall draw all people to myself."* And so **we** pray: Lift us, dwell in us, Lord Jesus!

And **then** Paul prays that Christ might indeed dwell in our hearts through faith. He asks that we may be rooted and grounded in Christ, which means *being rooted and grounded in love*, love for all. And it's precisely **here** that what might

seem to be a prayer for a **spiritual** miracle instead of a physical one, an **inner** change instead of an outer one, is shown for **what it is**, a whole new way of living, 24/7, inside and out.

But I hear you saying, **still** the hungry cry for bread and die for lack of bread. So where is the feeder of five thousand when we need him? **Here** he is, in our inner being, encouraging us on in love and saying to us, **I am** still feeding them, **through you** -- as you share your bread, work for justice, write letters to your senators and congresspeople, and open your hands because Christ has entered your heart. Yet paradoxically, **our** care – which is Christ’s care **through** us for those on the margin -- may cause **us** to be marginalized or called do-gooders or too generous for our own good. Not so! For the one **we** follow experienced and expressed God’s love most **fully** in his moment of greatest **weakness**, on the cross – it is the **Crucified One** whom God vindicated by resurrection. To follow **him** is to go the way of the cross...so we may not always find those we share our bread with grateful or those we prod to action appreciative of our suggestions for policy and programs. Yet that doesn’t at all mean give up. Jesus didn’t...and still doesn’t.

But back to the text: Paul makes a final ask on our behalf: *I pray that you may...experience this love that passes all understanding, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.*

Isn’t that the strangest prayer you ever heard? That we may **experience and know** Christ’s love which **surpasses knowledge**! How can you or I know something that **surpasses** knowledge? You can’t, I’m guessing. And I know I can’t. So even this **inner** miracle prayed for us today, like Jesus’ feeding of the 5000, has basketfuls of blessing left over...because the fullness of God **always** has left overs...it’s a mystery but it is true. And maybe it’s in living **into** this prayer that those holy left-overs will show up...in our lives and in the lives of others.

Paul’s eloquent and mystical prayer is deep and seemingly beyond our understanding. But there is a simple chant that I think can sum up everything **Paul** said and **I’ve** said today – a short hymn from the Iona Community that prays:

Take, o take me as I am.

Summon out what I shall be:

Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

It's Hymn 814. I invite you to turn to it and follow along as Mei plays it through once. Then **I'll** sing it once. And then **we'll** sing it together three times as **our** response to Paul's prayer for us and as our own **prayer**, trusting in God's promise and love.

Take, o take me, as I am.

Summon out what I may be.

Set your seal upon my heart,

And live in me.

May this be our prayer always. May this be for us the bread of love that never runs out and the bread we share with others who are hungry...for love, for community, for hope. **And P.S....**expect left-overs. Amen.