

## The Feeding of the 5000

John 6:1-15; 2 Chronicles 36:14-23; Ephesians 2:1-10.

A Sermon by Adam Gilbert Bartholomew

When I entered Union Seminary nearly 40 years ago, I did not anticipate that the people I would be studying with would turn out to be as important for my life as my professors. When we drove into the bowels of Van Dusen Hall in our moving van, the first person I met was Tom Boomershine, who turned out to be my mentor, colleague, and friend for the rest of my life. Tom is a visionary. He began by imagining that the stories in the Bible could be given a new voice, different from the traditional voice of dispassionate reading advocated in the western white church. He imagined that the stories could be learned by heart by a great cross section of members of the Christian church and told in a way that would give them new power in their lives. He began doing research to develop and ground his vision in a way that would commend it to scholars who were accustomed to treating the stories as written documents and not a spoken word. He began teaching the stories to groups of people as a spiritual practice and as a resource for ministry and life. As he was doing all this, I listened patiently, and I offered an occasional critical observation. But while I was at Union Seminary I never took the step of learning to tell a story.

After we graduated from Union and he began teaching at New York Theological Seminary and I began part-time teaching and part-time parish work, Tom met with a terrible accident. While walking around behind his car at a gas station, another car pulled in and slid on some oil, pinned his legs between the bumpers, broken them both and nearly cut the one off completely. Tom was in the hospital for the next 6 months. After he got home, I began to go to see him for a few days every 6 weeks or so. And we began a partnership in developing an international Network of Biblical Storytellers. As we sat out in his yard in White Plains one day, he began to envision this world-wide network of people learning stories in the Bible by heart and sharing them, telling them and listening to them, sharing them in the hospital, at board meetings, in prayer groups, as well as in worship and educational events. I sat there listening patiently as Tom spun out this vision. Sounded rather grandiose to me. But I began learning some stories and teaching my students how to tell them. And bit by bit, step by step, over the past nearly 40 years, we have developed an international network of Biblical Storytellers. It is not huge, but it includes people throughout the United States and Canada, and England and Australia. And many more people have come to one of our yearly Festival Gatherings, far more than have become permanent members of the Network. We have a monthly newsletter, a yearly journal. And for this year we will hold our third scholar's conference for people teaching Bible in various universities and seminaries who are teaching their students to learn stories by heart and reflect on them as oral events.

Without Tom's grand vision, there would be no network at all. It was only because had a vision that we developed the Network over the years. Day by day opportunities presented themselves that led us towards our vision. Without the vision, these

Sermon by Adam Gilbert Bartholomew

opportunities would have had no meaning. Only because he had a dream of where we wanted to go were we able to recognize these people and events and possibilities as steps along the way.

My experience with Tom is captured by that line from the musical *South Pacific*:

You've gotta have a dream.  
If you don't have a dream,  
How ya' gonna make a dream come true?

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Lent is a season that has a reputation for being a rather negative time, because it is a season for doing things that in the popular mind are not pleasurable, like fasting, or feeling slightly guilty for not fasting, or for reflecting on sin. I would propose that the idea of Lent deserves a different spin. We actually think about and do negative and unpleasant things all the time, like watch the news and read the paper and talk with each other about the awful state of the world. Lent is a time for addressing life in the world and for identifying sin from the perspective of the God who is making every effort to save the world!

Today's Gospel is a wonderful story. It is about feeding the impoverished masses. This is a great counter-image to the images of the masses projected at us moment by moment in our news media. In those images the masses are starving or dying of aids or being slaughtered. Here in the Gospel is an image of the oppressed and impoverished masses of Jesus' world being fed – more than fed, satisfied, even stuffed till they could not eat any more.

So where is the sin?

The sin pictured in this story is the sin of too little faith. Jesus is out in a wilderness area, on a mountain alongside the sea of Galilee. He looks up and sees this huge crowd coming towards him. And the first thing out of his mouth is this absurd question: "Where are we going to buy bread to feed all these people?" What a ridiculous question! Why would it ever occur to him to ask it?

Mark tells the story differently. In Mark the people have been with Jesus all day. And as the day wears on, it is the disciples who raise the question about the people's need to eat. "This is a lonely place, and the hour is late," they observe. "Send the people away into the surrounding country and villages to buy themselves food!" At that point Jesus comes up with his mind-blowing proposal: "You give them something to eat!"

But here in John, the question of how to feed the multitude of people coming toward him is the first thing out of his mouth! Their response is to point out how absurd it is and to ridicule it. Philip says that 8 month's wages would not buy enough for each of them to get a little. And Andrew, hardly able to get his little joke out of his mouth he is laughing

Sermon by Adam Gilbert Bartholomew

so hard, ridicules Jesus' question by pointing out that there is a kid there with 5 small loaves, oh, and even better, 2 fish! What a feast!

But the Jesus of John's Gospel is a visionary. Practical matters do not limit him; they are means for realizing his vision. He sees in the 5 loaves and 2 fish not scarcity but possibility.

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It is our vocation as the community of Jesus' disciples to be the medium that keeps before the world this vision of feeding, of meeting the needs of the impoverished and wretched masses of the world. This image of the feeding of the 5000 is an icon of the vocation of the people of God throughout the Bible, from the Exodus through the settlement in the Land Flowing with Milk and Honey to the Babylonian Exile – narrated in our Old Testament lesson from 2 Chronicles – an exile resulting from failing to live up to this vocation to the coming of Jesus to inaugurate the kingdom of God that would restore all God's creation to wholeness.

Is this idealistic? It certainly is! But then human culture is the fruit of idealism, either constructive or destructive.

I remember reading in grade school a biography of George Washington Carver. Here is a man who started with peanuts – literally! – and made all sorts of other food, including artificial meat. This is the story of scientific and technological development in a nutshell: someone gets a wild idea and pursues it until she succeeds. The secret is to be passionate and not give up.

Other human visions are destructive, often unimaginatively so: think of the imagination and dedication that went into developing nuclear weapons.

The question is not whether we will be idealists but to what ideals will we dedicate our passions and our resources. Our religious tradition identifies some ideals as holy, some as sinful and evil, some as the work of God, some as the work of "the ruler of the power of the air," as Paul puts it in the letter to the Ephesians.

Bono, the rock singer, is a rare example of a public figure who is projecting an ideal of meeting the needs of the impoverished and wretched masses of the world on a grand scale: ending poverty and the ravages of aids in Africa. What a grand and absurd vision! An article in the current issue of *Christian Century* describes him as "a man aware of his weaknesses, a man with a keen religious instinct, a man of bottomless energy and passion, a man grounded in long-term relationships, and a man for whom prayer and scripture are critical to his understanding of the world." (March 21, 2006, p. 20) He has used his personal resources of public popularity and money to meet with world leaders, like Tony Blair, Vladimir Putin, and George Bush. When asked whether he gets butterflies around them, he answers, "I'm never nervous when I meet politicians. I think *they* should be nervous because I'm representing the poor and wretched in this world. . . .

Sermon by Adam Gilbert Bartholomew

if there is a God, God has a special place for the poor. The poor are where God lives. So these politicians should be nervous, not me.” (P. 20)

What Bono is asking for is on the order of 5 loaves and 2 fish. He is asking the United States to give an additional 1 percent of our federal budget to the world’s poor. What a tiny bit! The miracle sought here is a miracle of the human heart to repent even a tiny bit of our thirst for weapons and the profits to be made from imagining and producing them and using them so that we can imagine more and make more profits in a cycle that threatens to end not in security but in self-destruction – to repent this destructive addiction and to turn around and embrace the life-giving ideals of the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus.

Lent is a season not only for attentiveness to human sin in order to see more clearly where we are “following the abominations of the nations” (2 Chronicles 36:14), “following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:1), so that by divine grace God can “[make] us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4). It is a season for attention to prayer. How do we pray when it comes to these “Big Hairy Audacious Goals”?

Tom Long is a great preacher and teacher of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. In the same, current issue of *Christian Century*, he tells the story told to him by a friend who was a pastor of a man who, while walking his dog, was stabbed in the heart by a mugger. While there was virtually no prospect for this survival, the staff of his friend’s church gathered to pray. Here is how the friend describes it:

Standing around the communion table, each person prayed. . . . [Tom’s friend] and others offered sincere prayers, but mostly polite and mild petitions, prayers that spoke of comfort and hope and changed hearts, but prayers that had already faced the hard fact of almost certain death.

Then the custodian prayed. . . . It was the most athletic prayer [Tom’s friend] had ever witnessed. The custodian wrestled with God, shouted at God, anguished with God. His finger jabbed the air and his body shook. “You’ve gotta save him! You just can’t let him die!” he practically screamed at God. “You’ve done it for others, your done it for me, now I am begging you do it again! Do it for him! Save him, Lord!” It was as if he grabbed God by the lapels and refused to turn God loose until God came with healing wings. . . . When we heard that prayer,” [my friend said,] “we just knew that God would indeed come to heal. In the face of that desperate cry for help, God would have been ashamed not to save the man’s life.”

We at Christ Church are dedicated to God’s work of feeding the world’s poor and wretched. Our Gospel story urges us: Don’t be timid in praying our vision! Don’t be timid in the scope of what we are asking for! When we look around and see the scale of need before our eyes, dare to ask, “Where are we going to get bread to feed all these

Sermon by Adam Gilbert Bartholomew

people?!” We may have no more than 5 loaves and 2 fish. But Jesus’ didn’t scale back his vision to fit the paltry amount of food he had at hand. He took those five loaves and two fish and he blessed them. He envisioned feeding everybody in the crowd with them, not just a little, but as much as they wanted. And God turned his vision into reality!