

# Sermon: Pentecost VIII: Proper 13

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Year A

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalm 145: 8-9, 15-22

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

In seminary... we knew not to cite Wikipedia as an authorized or scholarly resource... but they didn't include FaceBook on that list... and FB has sometimes... unexpectedly... been treasure in a field...

An author and reporter named Naomi Wolf posted something just a few days ago... she wrote something that relates to today's readings... and to what's going on in the world today... in the west... and in the east... on the surface... what she writes goes against so many of the more popular sound bytes we hear...but when we look deep... when we dig deep... I think we find some truth...

Naomi wrote: *God didn't "give" Israel to the Israelites. We as Jews are raised with the belief that "God gave us the land of Israel"... as recorded in Genesis -- and that ethnically "we are the chosen people." But actually -- and I could not believe my eyes when I saw this... she wrote... I checked my reading with major scholars and they confirmed it... actually God's "covenant" with the Jewish people... in Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy... is not about an ethnicity and not about a contract... it's about a way of behaving...*

*Again and again in the "covenant" language God never says: "I will give you... ethnic Israelites... the land of Israel." Rather God says something more radical... more subversive... more Godlike in my view. God says: IF you visit those imprisoned... act mercifully to the widow and the orphan... welcome the stranger in your midst... tend the sick... do justice and love mercy... and perform various other tasks... then you will be my people and this land will be your land...*

*So... "my people" is not ethnic... it is transactional. We are God's people not by birth... but by a way of behaving... that is ethical, kind and just... and we STOP being "God's people" when we are not ethical, kind and just. And ANYONE who is ethical, kind and just is, according to God in Genesis, "one of God's people." And the "contract" to "give" us Israel is conditional -- we can live in God's land IF we are just, merciful, and compassionate... it's in this way that we can be "God's people."*

*AND -- it never ever says... it is ONLY your land. Naomi writes... even when scripture spells out geographical "boundaries" ... as if God does such a thing... it never says this is exclusively your land... it never says I will give this land JUST to you. Remember these were homeless nomads who had left slavery in Egypt and were wandering around in the desert... at most these passages say... settle here... but they do not say... settle here exclusively... again and again it talks about welcoming "zarim" -- translated as "strangers"... but can also be translated as "people/tribes who are not you" -- in your midst.*

This is one person's perspective... and I can't speak to Naomi's scholarship... but there is wisdom here... if we are not called to Empire... which draws boundaries on maps... but are called to Kingdom... which sees one-ness in creation... then every assertion of divisive land ownership... over every need to cooperate... is an affront to God... and every instance of blame... or finger pointing... every conflict we hear described on MSNBC or on Fox News that puts Empire over Kingdom... takes us father from being God's people...

Scripture says you reap what you sow... but many of us empathize with those who have had bad karma... which implies... or acknowledges that they *didn't* deserve it... but *because* we have free will... there *are* people who have no part in the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis... but who end up maimed for life... totally innocent people have died...

In the quest for profit over health... airlines may be transporting people who don't know they're carrying ebola... and end up infecting others... and those in countries with substandard healthcare... just won't fare as well as Dr. Kent Brantly who arrived in ATL yesterday...

And even though God will ultimately redeem every person and every situation... in the cycles of sowing and reaping *before* that happens... wave after wave of heartbreak will roll in... and there will be great lament... my heart hurts when I see the news these days... people being hurt by too little safety... too little money... too little healthcare... too little food...

And Paul expresses this same kind of lament in today's Epistle... he says... I'd be willing to be accursed and cut off from Christ... if only my people... the Israelites... could know the love of God in Christ Jesus... if only they knew what I know... and it's easy for me to imagine him adding... then they'd be God's hands in this world... and so much suffering could be avoided...

When we hear today's Gospel... especially the part about Jesus multiplying the fish and the loaves... we can get caught on... stuck on... wondering how he did that... in eastern mystery religions... they say there's a vibrational sound from which each material object emerges... and some believe that knowing and being able to reproduce that sound... would enable you to... be a human replicator... like on Star Trek... and just create what you need or want...

In the west... we're familiar with miracle stories... with the Magi... magicians... we grew up with shows like Bewitched... and I Dream of Jeannie... we may think to ourselves... if only I could do that... I could solve world hunger... and I've wondered... would we be willing to give up some of our own free will... if we could just have peace and plenty... but even this is magical thinking... it takes me off the hook... allows me to avoid my own responsibility... and puts it all on God...

But when we're wondering about performing magic... there's a detail in how we approach this Gospel story that can be easily overlooked... Theologian John Dominic Crossan wrote: My point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically... but that they told them symbolically, and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.

Jesus may have taken... blessed... and broken... the loaves and the fish... but then he gave them to the disciples to hand out... it may be God in human form who takes what's available and blesses it... as God blessed all of creation in Genesis... but it's also God in human form who instructs us to hand it all out... it's similar to when Jesus raised Lazarus... Jesus did the heavy lifting... but then he said to the gathered community... unbind him and let him go...

So we arrive at a question... is today's story *history*... or is it *midrash*... could it have been digitally recorded... or not... and does it matter... because for me... whether it happened just this way or not... this is a story about God's abundance... it's the abundance that we heard about in the reading from Isaiah... it's about what God provides lavishly and unconditionally... and what we are to share... not as owners... but as stewards...

Theologian Dock Hollingsworth writes that *while it is clearly the miracle of Jesus that feeds the multitude... this does not reduce the call to discipleship... to a call of passive piety... our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus feeds the Twelve; but the Twelve feed the Five Thousand.*

And Naomi Watts may not have realized it... but she too wrote something about discipleship... about behavior that changes things... and here's I think... where the real miracle is... if God knows the sound for all of creation... and can draw all of creation out of nothing... then God can certainly provide enough... and if God can provide enough... the miracle is in not turning away from the hungry... not sending them off to get their

own food... and washing our hands of it... the miracle is in not turning away from the tormented faces of those in the Middle East who have lost entire families... saying it's not our concern... it doesn't affect us... the miracle is in not turning away from those who show up at our border seeking refuge and asylum... telling them we don't have room... just go back and take their chances with gangs and human trafficking...

A seminary colleague shared that the word "idiot" comes from the Greek ἴδιος, *idios*... it referred to something that's private... one's own... in Athenian democracy... it referred specifically to someone who was unconcerned with the events of the broader world and was only concerned with their own individual life...

So we could say that the real miracle... is in turning away from fear and greed... which stops the flow of God's abundance... the real miracle is in opening our hearts enough to the pain others feel... so that we follow God's covenant and through our actions become Israelites... the real miracle is in turning towards this Table for Eucharist... for Thanksgiving... and then being sent... turning towards the world... where we take what God has given us... bless it... and give it to a hurting world...

St. John Chrysostom wrote: *Feeding the hungry is a greater work than raising the dead...* because far too many people turn away...