

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 2, 2020
Preached during COVID-19, via Zoom

I have a love/hate relationship with the Bible stories that are the most common to us — the ones that we could probably re-tell first thing in the morning while still groggy. The stories are sticky, in a way. They stick in our minds from Sunday School to the day we die. The Flood. David and Goliath. The manger at Bethlehem. And, of course, the loaves and fishes. I love them because they are comfort food to me, like mashed potatoes or chocolate cake. I dread them because how on earth do you think of something new to say about a story that some of you have been listening to for longer than I have been alive.

You know the basics: it's the worst picnic in the history of the ancient near east. The crowds have come to hear the teachings of this strange rabbi from Nazareth, and everyone seems to have lost their collective minds and not thought to bring anything to eat. Or, more charitably, they didn't realize it was going to be an all day sermon. However it happened, Jesus and the disciples end up feeling a responsibility for the well being of tons of hungry people, until someone found some bread and fish, and somehow that was enough to go around with even some left over. It's a miracle, but it usually doesn't excite me too much because I've heard it so many times.

But something kind of magical happened when I read the text this week. I read it again — Jesus, the disciples, the people, the fish, the bread, the abundance — and I instantly knew that our church experienced this same miracle this week, and I knew that the mighty workings of God have not stopped.

Many of you know that we were not able to have a traditional funeral for Harry Moseley in the sanctuary as we would have wanted. I can just see the funeral in my head — the finest music, people telling stories while sometimes laughing and sometimes crying, an excellent sermon, I'm sure, and then a reception to end all receptions. If there is anything this church community is gifted at, it is coming together to remember one of our saints who has gone before us into the bosom of God.

And yet, we couldn't do that. We had a scarcity of options just as those early disciples had a scarcity of food.

And God showed up in a big way. People all over the church had ideas about how they might be able to help, how we might be able to keep safe and also remember a great man who had died.

And so, little by little, what had been a sadness about what we lacked, instead became a celebration of the abundance that we have.

The gardeners made our memorial garden shine, the flower ladies created lush bouquets, our altar guild set up candles and pictures, while ushers guided people through the vigil and staff people made clear signs and worked on logistics.

And we remembered Harry on Tuesday night, under the glow of a sunset and with the flickering of candles warming the prayers we offered to God in thanksgiving for the life well lived of a man that we loved and who loved this church. Out of very little — flowers, candles, and a summer evening — God provided an abundance. Because that is the nature of God's love. It cannot be contained by scarcity; it cannot be contained by illness; and it certainly cannot be contained by death.

And so I didn't dread opening the bible this week to find a story I have been hearing since the day I was born. Instead, I saw in that story something true about God that resonated with what I see in our church right now.

It is tempting to concentrate on all the ways in which we are diminished right now, but if Harry's death has taught me anything, it is that through the mercy and grace of God, we are more connected, more grounded, more loved, and more powerful than we have any right to expect. All because of the lavish love of God that sustains us in adversity.

Loaves and fishes are multiplying and feeding people all over this world, right now, in ways that we might not have imagined six months ago. Can you see it in your own life? Can you think of or imagine a place where God has brought into being abundance where there was scarcity? I imagine you can, or if you haven't given it any thought, perhaps spend some time this week looking around with the eyes of abundance and see where blessings are raining down on you or on our parish, even when it seems sometimes bleak.

Even in his death, Harry gave a gift to this church. I think that remembering him last Tuesday taught us — or perhaps reminded us — that there is no place that God cannot work. What seems impossible to us is infinitely possible by the grace of God. Thank you, Harry. Amen.