

I was all set to write this week's sermon on the Feeding of the 5000. I had it all worked out—examples, stories—all the things that will hopefully make a sermon sound less like a dissertation and more like something that captures the imagination. Then I realized that this was John's version of the story, not one of the Synoptic versions.

The Synoptic versions: Matthew, Mark and Luke, are put together in a more historical context. They take us on a roughly chronological trip through Jesus' life: from his early ministry to his crucifixion.

The Gospel of John is distinctly different.. For example, in John's gospel

- there is no birth narrative,
- Jesus doesn't get baptized by John,
- he isn't tempted in the wilderness,
- he is never transfigured on the mountain,
- there is no Sermon on the Mount,
- and in John there is no Last Supper. Only the story of the food-washing.

The Gospel of John is a book of Theology about Jesus. It is probably the first book of theology about Jesus. It was never meant to be read as just a story about where Jesus went, and what he did. It was meant to show who Jesus was.

Which brings us to John's re-telling of the Feeding of the 5000 today.

The clue that this story isn't anything like the other 3 gospels comes right away with the statement that "*the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.*" Did you catch that? This timing doesn't happen in any of the other three gospels. In this one, the Passover is about to take place. So—Jesus asks everyone to sit down on the grassy area on the side of a mountain.

In the Synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke—what happens next? In all three other versions, the disciples notice the crowds and suggest to Jesus that he dismiss them because it's late and they don't have enough food.

In John's gospel, Jesus himself notices the crowd, realizes it's the Passover, and says to Phillip: "*Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?*" So Phillip dutifully look around and finds a convenient child who has five barley loaves and two fish.

Do you remember who had the bread and fish in the other three gospels? The disciples.

But not here—here it's in the hands of a child. We'll come back to that.

Jesus asks everyone to sit down and then he does something that should seem very familiar to every one of us. He **TOOK** the bread, **BLESSED** it, **BROKE** it and **GAVE** it to everyone. What is that? What do we do every week that always have 4 distinct parts? **TOOK-BLESSED-BROKE-GAVE**.

The Eucharist.

Jesus is presiding at a Passover feast. On a mountain.

Everything in John holds symbolism. We all have to remember that when we read, or hear, or study John. Nothing in John is literal. Ever.

Everything has mystical, symbolic meaning. Everything he writes is meant to resonate with believers in their mind, their heart and their soul.

Mountains, for example, represent the pinnacle of our understanding. Symbolically—it's the place where we experience God. Those mountaintop experiences.

And now we come back to the child. A child is there with the fish and bread.

Symbolically—we have received our nourishment from God as children— young in the faith—we are children of God, children of light, and we bring what we have to God, and God takes it, blesses it with Holy Spirit, and gives it back to us. We do this every week at the Eucharist, and every day of our lives.

We are met by God in this holy food and we are fed until we are satisfied. This part of the story is identical in all 4 accounts.

So-- after the meal: they gathered up the remainder of the 5 loaves of bread (I guess the fish were really popular), and they filled 12 baskets of the fragments.

Is that the same as what happened in the 3 synoptic gospels? (You know this is trick question, don't you?) It's nearly the same. But John has to get one more theological statement in.

In the other 3 gospels they just mentions bread fragments. In John, he specifically says that the bread fragments are the remainder of the 5 loaves. Think this is not important? Think again!

What might 5 symbolize in this very Jewish gospel? (That was a broad hint, by the way...)

The five books of the Torah. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Torah. The LAW of God. To John, the Christianity movement comes out of the Jewish faith.

How about the 12 baskets? Disciples. 12 tribes of Israel.

So—out of the Jewish traditions comes 12 new tribes of Christ, following the example of the 12 disciples.

Oh—and 12 in “Hebrew” tradition, is a number that symbolizes completion. It's all very symbolic, isn't it? Very mystical? That's John's Gospel/

To John, this Jesus of Nazareth was destined on the feast of the Passover to be the One who saves the world. And this One feeds us everything we need to nourish us --out of his very being --until we are full.

And so there we are: built on the Law, broken open by the love of Christ, and sent out to feed the world with all the love we have—the remainder of the bread.

That's the story that John is telling!

To him this story isn't just a miracle, it's our faith journey itself. Amen.