

Blessed Bother
 Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 16:2-4a
 Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 14:13-21

Oh bother! Perhaps you recall Winnie the Pooh's go-to expression in the face of life's irritants, interruptions, failures, accidents, and fools. Oh bother! I like it. There's a certain dignity to it. As a reaction to life's indignities it is less inflammation, more de-escalation. As such, in our increasingly coarse and incendiary world, may I be so bold as to offer a proposal? What if we started a movement to use *Oh bother* as a substitute for that profligate potentate of profanity, the f-bomb? People have become so flatulent in their use of the fire-breathing f-word as to render it boorish, ineffective, and a good candidate for extinction. It's an ugly word, and it is used so profusely these days that the shock value is gone, leaving it to serve as nothing more than an obnoxious extraneous noise, the auditory equivalent to the public passing of gas.

Just think, if you edited that one word out of most modern films, you'd get out of the theatre, or in these Covid days, out to walk the dog at least a half an hour sooner. Or, in the case of Scorsese's *The Departed*, it would have been reduced to the length of your average movie trailer.

Oh bother! I think that is the perfect substitute. I know people would welcome an alternative, because they're always floundering for something less objectionable. Frigging? What is that? Sounds like shorthand for frog gigging or maybe what a small naval vessel does at sea. Clearly, an alternative would benefit the common good.

Think about it, Oh bother! Isn't it more fitting for most of the occasions you choose that other word, anyway? Doesn't that other word escape your lips when faced with, hit by, confronted with something or someone you just don't want to bother with? O bother. How about it? Let's join good ol' Winnie the Pooh and start a trend.

O bother! That's what the disciples are thinking. Our text today presents as a miracle story, yet at its core, Matthew's account of the feeding of the five thousand is a powerful memorandum Jesus offers to the church, the disciple, the Christian, you, me, challenging our impulse to avoid the bother of this world's ills; our tendency to assume that responsibility lies outside our own skin; the conviction that it's not our problem, whatever it is.

There are 64 miracle stories in the Gospels. Matthew incorporates twenty of them, and it is most instructive to note that, with the exception of the fig tree, all the miracles are performed for the benefit of human beings. Fred Craddock points out that even the nature miracles, like the calming of the stormy sea, are performed to help people in distress.

It is also important to acknowledge that miracle stories didn't start with Jesus. Such narratives about miraculous signs were common in the Hellenistic world, and not always associated with the divine. In addition, neither Paul's letters, nor the other New Testament epistles, dwell on the miracle stories of Jesus' ministry.

What is significant about the miracle stories of the Gospels is what they tell us about the character of God, as revealed in the Son, Jesus Christ, and what they tell the church about its identity and mission. Yes, the feeding of the 5,000, expanded by Matthew to possibly 10,000 plus, is one of the most familiar of miracle stories, almost as familiar in the secular world as it is in Christendom. However, the miracles alone do not make Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ. The

framing, context, and interplay of these holy encounters awaken our senses to the divine invasion of the incarnate Word.

In Matthew, this particular feeding story immediately follows a separate and opposite sort of feast. Herod is having a birthday and there's a party, party, as in the opposite of the cotillion.

Sometimes, in the hustle and bustle of a South End Friday evening, we'll spy an exuberant, provocatively festooned and swagified group of young adults ambling across an intersection's crosswalk, and Donna and I will catch one another's eye with that look that says, "Well, I don't think they're headed to a bible study." Break out the disco lights, pump up the jam, throw in some sweat, hormones, and a whole lot of booze 'cause there's a party going on!

You wonder if a hungover Herod would even remember what he had done the night before? Yet, it's obvious that things got way out of hand because the video replay would reveal Herod messing with his brother's wife, lusting after his niece, and serving up the head of his nemesis, John the Baptist on a platter.

So, having that portrait in our minds of how a king of this world acquits himself, Matthew takes us to an entirely different setting where we witness the comportment of an entirely different sort of king.

Upon hearing the news of John's horrific end, Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew by boat "to a deserted place." A *deserted place*. Matthew's giving us a clue here. What would be another name for a deserted place? Wilderness, which takes us back to the Old Testament narrative of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, where the Lord provided manna, quail, and water as the escaped slaves wandered and whined all the way to the promised land.

When Jesus' boat came ashore, it turns out that the deserted place wasn't so deserted after all. Picture this, Jesus travels by boat, but upon arrival, he finds that the people he thought he had left behind were already at his destination waiting for him. Sounds to me like the people were not only fleet-footed, but also annoyingly needy. The reader is tempted to lament, "Come on! Give the guy a break!" Grieving the tragic loss of John, knowing that he could very well be next, weighed down and drained by the excessive attention and needs of his intrusive followers, Jesus certainly felt the need for some social distance, but it

was not to be. Yet, where you or I would suffer a meltdown, Matthew tells us, Jesus "had compassion for them," rolled up his sleeves, and used the gifts he had available to him to meet their needs. Keep that in mind as we examine what happens next.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

"They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Like Jesus, the disciples saw a need, but unlike Jesus, the disciples didn't want to be bothered with it. It's overwhelming; it's too much; it's not my responsibility; I didn't sign up for this; I'd rather not get involved.

When comic Dave Chappell was being awarded the Mark Twain award, his friend John Stewart, in a good-natured way, roasted him exquisitely. Seeing Chappell in a restaurant one day, the two had one of those bro-love reunions, quickly catching up, and Stewart's light bulb flashed. "Hey, you know, I'm on my way to the hospital to visit with a group of wounded warriors in rehab after serving in Afghanistan and

Iraq. You know, it's one thing if I visit, but if you would come, it would blow them away. What do you say?" Chappell was silent for a moment, and then said, "Nah, I'm good."

Now, Chappelle has accomplished much in the charitable world, but in that particular moment, he just did what most of us do far too often. Each morning we wake to a world groaning in travail, beset by these huge, seemingly intractable, interwoven issues: hunger, poverty, pandemic, injustice, conflict, fractured politics, broken institutions, racial inequality, polarized communities. We know it is all there, screaming for attention. Why, we're even more than willing to give you an opinion about it, echoing the scripts and screeds of some unqualified, overcaffeinated, angry pundit with a microphone and a website. We can name the problems and complain about results, but in answer to the question of what we, individually or corporately, are going to actually do to pursue the blessed and peaceable community, we see it as a bother and find it too easy to say, "Nah, I'm good."

"You know Jesus, it's late, I'm tired. Just send them away, will ya?" "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Now, these disciples have been around Jesus long enough to perceive that it

would be just like Jesus to say something like that. So, they were prepared for it. "Yo, Jesus, come on, man! Look at that crowd. All we have are five loaves and a couple of fish sticks. That's not even enough for us. Have you seen Thaddeus eat?"

You have to give the disciples credit here. They are quick on their feet, employing a tactic that has continually been perfected through the centuries. Walter Brueggemann calls it "the myth of scarcity;" the misguided notion that there is never enough to go around so I must get all I can, while I can, as long as I can. It's the same mentality behind the t-shirt I saw some dude wearing up in the mountains that said, "I don't have to be faster than the bear. I just have to be faster than you." I have to get all I can before you can. It is ironic that as you acquire more and more, it tends not to reduce, but only increase your anxiety and stoke your fear of not having enough, or worse, losing what you have.

In the book, *The Last Castle*, a friend said of George Vanderbilt, "It's a very hard position at times to be with one who can absolutely never think of expense ... You know I do not for a moment envy the position of George Vanderbilt. He is not one speck as happy as I am,

and the spending of money gives him absolutely no thrill. Half of the pleasure in life comes from learning to choose between things."

The disciples thought they had out-rationalized Jesus, "Look at that crowd. Send them away before they start bothering us, as if we have a convoy of food trucks on the way." (Denise Kiernan, *The Last Castle*)

When will we give up trying to outsmart Jesus? Won't happen. Non-anxious, unperturbed, Jesus tells the disciples, the church, us, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat. Bring me what you have." Walter Brueggemann says, "We baptized people are the ones who have signed on for the Jesus story of abundance. We are the ones who have decided that this story is true story, and the four great verbs – he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave – constitute the true story of our lives. As a result, we recognize that scarcity is a lie, a story repeated endlessly, in order to justify injustice in the community.

"We have in our baptism declared the old story of scarcity to be false ... We notice that we have more than we need. We notice that we do not need to keep so much for ourselves. We notice that as we share, more is given. We notice that every time we commit to the truth of

abundance, new energy, new joy, and new well-being surge among us."

(Walter Brueggemann, *Gospel of Hope*)

This week, the nation honored the amazing journey, witness, and work of the son of a sharecropper. John Lewis could have easily walked away from the hard, dangerous journey up Martin Luther King's mountain, but courageously, he chose to march on. He was not born with much, but he gave more than most, and his life was dedicated to the benefit of all.

Lord knows, we've got a bucket full of woes in this weary world, buckets just waiting for someone to empty. Send them away, we pray; but Jesus says, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." May we heed the call of Jesus reflected in the words that John Lewis left to us, "Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet."

(John Lewis, *Across That Bridge*) You give them something to eat. Discover the blessedness in the bother. Amen.