

*A sermon given on Sunday, July 26, 2009
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Loaves & Fishes, Love & Fear

The miracle of the loaves and fishes is one of few incidents in Jesus' ministry reported in all four gospels, and the story is very familiar to us.

I've got a quirky little commentary on the Gospels written in the Middle East in the 1930's. The author provides a novel explanation of what happened that day in the crowd. In the Near East, he writes,

when the caravan is on the road, every man tries to conserve his supply of bread. Some men pretend they are short of bread and blame the shortage on their wives. They use this pretense because, while mid-Easterners are generous in sharing their food at home, on the journey [it might run out.] ... This all changes on the return journey. Now everybody becomes generous because it is contrary to custom to arrive home with stale bread. Those who had hitherto hidden their bread are now ready to share it with others. Men who had previously stated they did not have enough, suddenly display many loaves which they pull from [the capacious folds of] their garments.

Jesus went to seek a lonely place, but he was followed by the large crowd. In accordance with custom, these travelers surely carried loaves of bread and fish.... [Many] were afraid Jesus might stay a long time in the desert and they were fearful lest they would not have sufficient to last the time they spent, [so they hid it.] When Jesus decided to dismiss the crowds, ... the disciples found a boy with five loaves of bread and two fishes in his garments. He was willing to share with the crowd. When he did this, others who had concealed their bread and now realizing Jesus had finished preaching and that they were about to return home, produced the food saved in their garments and offered it to the hungry crowd. [George Lamsa, *Gospel Light*, 1936; reprinted 1992 by Harper Collins; p. 346]

Well, what do you think? For anyone who would deny the possibility of miracles, this could be an attractive explanation. I suppose even this version of the story carries a certain salutary lesson. Selfish people starting to share is a good thing. Bill Wiedrich, a former assistant bishop in Chicago, used to tell a similar version of the story, and his ending was always the same. "You tell me," he'd ask dramatically, "which would be the greater miracle: to produce 5,000 loaves of bread where there had formerly been none, or to produce 5,000 generous hearts where there had formerly been only selfish ones?"

I myself am inclined to think that in order for this story to have survived essentially the same in all four gospels, something rather amazing must have happened that day – something more remarkable than a bunch of selfish people realizing that the bread stuffed in their fanny packs was starting to go stale and they might as well share it! I for one am willing to believe that the universe is open to God's intervention. I think one message here is that no matter how limited our resources seem, they will prove to be adequate if we are open to God's provision, and alert to God's direction in our use of those resources. Frankly, provision by a miracle of Jesus seems at least as likely to me as 5,000 hidden personal stashes which the disciples apparently knew nothing about. But Bishop Wiedrich has a point – the miracle of provision had to be coupled with the miracle of sharing. All the food in the world would not have fed 5,000 people without the generosity of spirit and the hard work required to share it around, where it was needed.

I suggest that when we are blocked from being generous, it is usually because of fear. And when we are liberated from fear and enabled to share – or enabled to do many other things – it is usually because of love. Thus are we brought back once again to a note I have sounded frequently in the past year: the biblical assertion that love casts out fear. I John 4:18 - *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

On the hillside with Jesus, people with little to share were perhaps inspired to be generous with one another. Love cast out fear.

In Ft. Wayne, Indiana, a man named Mark Pratt volunteered to give up a kidney for transplant to a man in Florida whom he had never met, just because it was needed. Love casts out fear.

In East Texas a teenage girl last month lifted an overturned car off her sister and pulled her to safety. Love casts out fear.

Forty years ago a man from Ohio became the first to walk on the surface of the moon, risking an unknown fate because he was convinced that such exploration would benefit humankind. Love casts out fear.

Sometime soon your fellow parishioner Dan Knaup will travel to Iraq to serve as a chaplain with women and men deployed to the danger of that place, because he wants them to know they are not alone. Love casts out fear.

In California last week at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, bishops and deputies took steps further to remove barriers to the full inclusion of all faithful baptized persons in the life and ministry of this church. Because love casts out fear.

Here at St. Paul's we are engaged in a campaign for the future of the parish and its ministries at a time when common wisdom said it would be safer to hunker in and wait out the economic storm; but generous hearts are offering what they can, as they can. Because love casts out fear.

A couple faces the grave illness of one member, staring death in the face with grief and anticipated loss, but also with mutual strength and extraordinary grace. Love casts out fear.

I am growingly convinced that this is one of the deepest truths we can come to grasp, and that it is true in every realm of our existence: individual and communal; economic, spiritual, emotional. That perfect love casts out fear. That focusing our hearts and minds fully on the demands and the reassurances of love is the best way – perhaps sometimes the only way – to move forward in the face of uncertainty, confusion, anxiety.

Where in your life today is the place of greatest anxiety? What movement, progress, or transformation is being blocked by the fog of fear? Can the demands and the promises of God's perfect love lead you through and beyond that fearful place?

With the poet, we pray:

*O love that casts out fear, O love that casts out sin,
Tarry no more without, but come and dwell within.*

*True sunlight of the soul, surround us as we go;
So shall our way be safe, our feet no straying know.*

*Great love of God, come in! Wellspring of heavenly peace;
Thou Living Water, come! Spring up and never cease.*

[Horatius Bonar; Hymn 700]