Sermon for July 29, 2018
The Rev. Anne Arthur

2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

Today’s gospel holds two of the most beloved stories in the new testament: the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and the story of Jesus walking on the sea. These stories stick in our memories and linger in our hearts. They are tales that challenge rationality. To the faithful, these stories reveal a God whose powerful love keeps us always in view and reaches beyond reason to accompany us in our trials and our joys.

In the early days of Christianity, this pair of stories, with their themes of divine feeding and protection during water crossings, resonated with scriptural stories of Moses and Elisha and helped elevate Jesus’ status as a prophet. For us, the feeding of the five thousand resonates with our Eucharistic meal and offers a “first supper” bookend to the meal we remember in our liturgy, Jesus’ last supper with his friends.

Online homilist, The Rev. Jason Cox, wrote: “The story we heard…about Jesus feeding the 5,000—stands out in the Gospels. …It shows up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke — since these three share a common source … this is not surprising. But John also includes it, which is interesting, because there’s not much overlap between John and the other Gospels. And on top of that, Matthew and Mark like this story so much that they tell it twice! The second telling is almost identical, except in that version only 4,000 people are fed. The point is, this story about feeding the multitudes was important enough to make it into the Gospels six times. And there are only four Gospels.”

Miracles and miracle stories: Are they reassuring…a reason to trust…a reason to believe? Or are they suspect…frustrating in their unlikeliness…and something we want to dismiss?

You won’t get any explanations from me this morning. I think our very existence is a miracle, from the universe being formed out nothing to the wonder of butterflies that travel thousands of miles.

It likely is the prophetic and Eucharistic overtones of this story that account for its many appearances in the gospels, but it also holds some lovely messages for us.
Using the words of Jesus and the disciples as guideposts, here are some of the messages this gospel holds for me.

First, small actions can make a difference.

When Jesus saw a large crowd coming toward him, his first thought was to feed them. So he turned to Philip and asked, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

( Did you ever think you would hear Jesus ask a question about shopping?)

Philip’s reply was dismissive but it clearly defined the scope of the problem: “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

Andrew, on the other hand, volunteered a quiet statement about something he had seen. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish,” he said. And then, as though realizing how silly that might sound, he added, “But what are they among so many people?”

There is a lovely innocence in Andrew—an openness to possibilities and a willingness to voice them. Jesus knew just how to use that openness and make the most of those possibilities. Andrew’s suggestion was exactly the catalyst that was needed for the feeding to unfold.

I suspect I would have answered as Philip did: deem the problem too enormous to even consider and decide for myself that there was just “no way.”

But I’d like to be more like Andrew. Andrew didn’t judge his own words and swallow them before speaking. As unlikely a help as his observation seemed, he spoke up, not worried about whether he sounded silly for doing so.

Andrew is a hero!

Second, Jesus makes a way where there is no way.

Jesus began by saying, “Make the people sit down.” It’s easy to imagine that five thousand tired people, hurting, hungry, and standing up, carry some tension.

So Jesus invites them to sit down, to be comfortable during their wait for his attention.
While an invitation to sit isn’t exactly the “deserted place” that Dean Jim spoke of last week, it is moving in that direction. By virtue of being more comfortable, a seated crowd may be more receptive to Jesus, and to one another. Sitting down together creates an opportunity to linger in conversation and begin relationships. For people on the margins due to poor health, being in relationship with others is, in itself, healing.

John’s gospel tells us: “there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down.” I hear an echo of the Psalm 23: He makes me lie down in green pastures.

After Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and distributed it, ALL were fed—fed until they were satisfied and then some.

We may grapple with how it is that this miracle feeding occurred, but the important thing is that it did. Philip’s certainty that feeding the crowd was an impossible task was not impossible for Jesus. It happened. Jesus found a way when others were sure there was none. He found a way when there was no way.

Many of us have experienced times when we had no idea how to make our way through difficulty. And then, with God’s help, we somehow do. I can surely say that the power of God, especially as accessed by the faithful in this very church, has made a difference in my life. Perhaps there are others present with us here, right now, who can say the same.

On a larger scale, most would agree we are in a challenging time politically, and this has social, and personal impact. Finding ways to bridge divisions and to improve the outcomes for our country and our world can seem overwhelming. It’s important to know that God is with us, and that, with God, ways forward may open up where there currently seem to be no ways.

Third, treasure the leftovers.

After all had eaten, Jesus said to the disciples, “Gather up the leftovers so that nothing may be lost.” In all versions of this story, baskets are filled with leftovers—a sure sign of God’s abundance. But in John’s gospel we hear, “so that nothing may be lost.”

Jesus’ words speak to the sanctity of his provision and, indeed, the holiness and preciousness of all of creation.
Jesus was speaking of the fragments of bread and fish that were not consumed by the five thousand, but his mandate could be applied in all sorts of ways, on all sorts of fronts, where our leavings are not respectful of life’s holiness either because they are wasteful, or because they are harmful.

Disregard for the environment, for example, is both wasteful an harmful, and leads to loss that is incalculable.

The word “leftovers” also conjures up a societal image of people who are not needed for one reason or another: illness, incapacity, age, etc. Many lived on the margins of society in Jesus’ day, just as many do now, in our own day. “Leftovers” may be a fair description of much of the multitude that sat on that grassy hillside.

Jesus asks his disciples to find these fragments—these leftovers, these blessed remnants that are not needed in the present moment, and to gather them up, so that they may not be lost.

We don’t have to become lost to life and lost to those we care about when we come to an impasse. This beloved story tells us that, with God’s help, there is a way through.

Looking inward, we might understand Jesus’ command to gather fragments in yet another way. Many of us carry shards of experience and remnants of choices that can be hard to live with; things we would rather discard than ever revisit, let alone keep or repurpose. But, if we listen to Jesus, we hear that we are to gather up these remainders and let them be part of the blessing that we are meant to be.

How many times have I and, no doubt, many of you heard Canon Lynell Walker say: “In God’s economy, nothing is wasted. God knows how to use everything.” I believe this is true for each of us and all of us, individually and collectively. It tells me that our fragments and uncomfortable leftovers can be useful to God in making a way out of no way.

We are precious in God’s sight. It is why Jesus made himself available to us, to the point of death. It is why he taught his disciples to carry on in his stead after he died. It is why we pray and listen for what God has to say to us as we join in that work too.
As we pray today for people everywhere, we pray especially for those close to us who are affected by the terrible, terrible fires in Redding, that they may receive the help they need, find a way through their difficulty, and be gathered into God’s loving arms after devastating loss.

With God working for us, and in us, and through us, may we have courage to trust that our voices and thoughts matter enough to be heard. May we trust that God is with us, helping us find a way through whatever blocks our call to new life. And may we bless the world with our tender care for the preciousness of all creation. All of this is possible, as Paul says in today’s epistle, by making room for him who, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Amen