

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 25, 2021 – PENTECOST 9 / PROPER 12B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Who’s in Charge?*”

2 Kings 4:42–44 (The Lord feeds His people with food that does not run out)
Psalm 145:10–19 (All God’s works praise His faithfulness and righteousness; He is near to all who call upon Him)
Ephesians 3:14–21 (St. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians, and praise to God)
St. John 6:1–21 (Jesus feeds the 5,000 miraculously)

There are two stories in our Gospel lesson for today—about Jesus feeding the 5,000 and then walking on the water in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Taken together, they tell of a *great* picnic followed by a nice evening on the lake that suddenly went horribly downhill. Did that ever happen in your life or work? Everything seems to be going great, then all of a sudden, the rug is pulled out from under you and everything that can go wrong does.

I figure everyone here today knows what I’m talking about. Whether it’s accidentally lighting your apron on fire at a family bar-b-que; the car breaking down just as you’ve begun to enjoy a relaxing ride—in the middle of nowhere; your boiler going kaput on a Sunday in January; or your cat waking you up at 3 in the morning on the one day you could have slept until 9 a.m. What all of these anecdotes, including the Gospel’s, have in common, is they remind us that without warning, life can get out of control and there seems to be nothing we can do about it—except swear, panic, get angry.

Also, these two stories answer two important questions. First, when does $5 + 2 \times 1 = 12$? I’m no good at arithmetic, but even I know that’s mathematically impossible. Yet, somehow, in St. John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000, the multiplication formula works just like that: five loaves of barley bread, plus two small fish, times *Jesus*—the one person who is in control—equals food for everyone and twelve baskets of *leftovers*.

The key ingredient in that multiplication formula is Jesus, who, when we give up control to Him, works multiplications, wonders, and even miracles. Give Jesus what you have and He can miraculously make much more than you can ever imagine out of it. How does this miracle of multiplication happen? It can happen if, and when, we remember that *Jesus* is in control, and we are not—and never will be.¹

Second, how can we be saved from those things in life which overtake us, overwhelm us, or otherwise threaten to undo us? When the storms of life threaten, we can turn to the One who is stronger than we are, and, who is stronger than the raging winds and waves. Just as we can’t control the weather, we can’t avoid the tempests that happen in our lives. They come to all people—the good, the bad, and the indifferent—sooner or later. Just as God does not promise to keep us from the valley of the shadow of death, God doesn’t pledge to eliminate flooding downpours from our lives. On the other hand, the Lord *does* assure us that we can get through life’s raging storms if we trust that Jesus is in control.

At first, I wondered why these two Gospel stories in John 6:1-21 were combined. Shouldn’t the Lectionary have broken them up into two Sunday readings? But the more I looked at the pairing of these two accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, I could see that the “Who’s in control?” issue was central to both.

In the first story, the feeding of what was more likely 12,000 people (counting women and children), Phillip is faced with what appears to be an unsolvable problem. Seeing the very large crowd, Jesus asks him specifically—because Phillip knew the neighborhood—“Where do we buy bread for these people to eat?”² Jesus, the disciples, and thousands of people were out on a hillside just north of the Sea of Galilee with no towns nearby, and they had not eaten in a long time. And back then, it’s not as though there was a Costco, BJ’s, or Sam’s Club that dealt in mass-orders of *anything*.

So the question before Phillip seemingly has no answer. Then another disciple, Andrew, makes an observation that can’t possibly be a solution, either: “There’s a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.” He follows this comment by saying out loud what everyone else must’ve been thinking: “But what are these among so many people?”

“What are we going to do?” “How can we solve this problem?” “Is there some way this can be fixed?” “Does anyone have an answer?” These are the kinds of questions we’ve all asked at some point in our lives, as we’ve had to deal with the nasty surprises, problems, and difficulties that are part of being human.

Just this past week, I must have wasted close to four hours on *countless* phone calls back and forth to my doctor, Medicare, the insurance company, the pharmacy, and God only knows what else, just trying to get a simple prescription straightened out. And, I had to have my reading glasses re-made *three times* until the optician finally got it right. At his printing job, Rick got an order for a local Lancaster customer. It was printed in Maryland, which is what happens now that his company was bought out. The Maryland office said they had shipped it to Lancaster, but Rick had no tracking number. It turns out, the job was sitting in the Maryland warehouse, so the Pennsylvania driver brought it back up to hand-deliver to the Lancaster customer. And that was only one of a boat load of aggravations of that crossed his desk. I imagine there were times he felt as though *he* was sinking or drowning, much like the disciples in that boat on the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm.

When these kinds of irritations and annoyances seem to take forever to work out, we begin to wonder “Who’s in control?” “Who’s in charge, here?” We realize full well that we are not, when we’ve been on ‘hold’ for 45 minutes—being forced to listen to the worst so-called ‘music’ ever recorded.

On that day in our principal Gospel story, not Phillip, not Andrew, not the hungry people, not even the little boy whose lunch his Mom had packed for him before they left home, was in control. *Everyone* was faced with a seemingly impossible situation. But Jesus essentially said, “I’ll handle it, I’m taking charge.” And He did—with miraculous results!

Still today, Jesus handles things for us and takes charge, when we turn over to Him whatever situation for which we lack the resources or answers. This is not to say that things will always work out just fine. Too many times, they don’t. But Christ is still with us.

Just look a little closer at the second story in today’s Gospel. This isn’t the one from St. Mark, where Jesus stills the wind and waves by commanding them to stop—and they do. In this story, Jesus is in the midst of the storm *with* the disciples. While He doesn’t change the weather, He *does* get them and their boat safely to shore.

From this, we can see that if, for whatever reason, God chooses not to fix our situation— heal that loved-one for whom we are praying, or fully meet some desperate need—He ensures that Christ will get us through it *somehow*. The storm may still be raging with no end in sight, but with Jesus’ help, we and our swamped boat will get to shore safely.

Whatever challenge you may be facing now, no matter if it is trivial or urgent, I hope you will take from these two Gospel stories the solid truth that Jesus is in control. Christ is in charge, He knows what we need. He cares about nourishing our bodies and keeping our souls safe, and He is able to do miracles—or, to get us through to the other side, even when the miracles don’t come.

But today’s Gospel message doesn’t stop quite there. In order to feed *all those people*, Jesus needed Andrew to bring Him the little boy’s basket of bread and fish. And when the disciples were in their boat battling a tempest, John writes that after they realized it was Jesus walking on the water toward them, “they wanted to take him into the boat.” In other words, they reached out to Jesus and wanted Him with them. Even though He doesn’t get in their boat, just possibly, their *wanting Him* with them was why they and their small craft reached safety.

We are to bring Jesus what we have, for Him to work with—as I often say, “Do your best; let God do the rest”—but we are also to want Christ with us, to invite Him into our stormy situation, to think of Him as our life-preserver when we feel so overwhelmed by *stuff*, it’s as though we’re drowning.

“Who’s in charge?” Not us, that’s for sure. Thank God, He is! Amen? Amen.

¹ Inspired by Ron Lavin, “Giving up Control,” [Sermons.com](http://sermons.com) via <sermons@sermons.com> 20 July 2021.

² “Philip was from Bethsaida. Simon and Andrew were from Capernaum. This miracle took place right in the neighborhood of Bethsaida. Jesus may have reasoned that because Philip had grown up in the area, asking him about the local resources would make sense.” From, “Why did Jesus ask Philip for a solution?” [The Jeremiah Study Bible](http://jeremiahstudybible.org/John/why-did-jesus-ask-philip-solution/), <<http://jeremiahstudybible.org/John/why-did-jesus-ask-philip-solution/>> 21 July 2021.