

Isaiah 55:1-5
Psalm 145: 14-21
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

Sermon for August 2, 2020

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

A few weeks back we talked about the so-called parable of the sower and the seed and the various kinds of soil. And we pointed out then that Jesus Himself said that understanding this parable is foundational to understanding all the other parables. For that reason you often hear the parable of the Sower referred to as the Mother of All Parables.

In the same vein, I think, we might refer to the episode recounted in our Gospel reading for today as the Mother of All Miracles. The importance that the apostles and the very earliest followers of Jesus attached to it is shown by the fact that it is the only one of Jesus' miracles that is recounted by all four of the Gospel writers: you find a version of it in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and a somewhat more detailed version in the Gospel of John.

So we're naturally led to ask what it was about this particular miracle that made it so central to their understanding of Jesus, and equally to our own understanding.

Since it's the lectionary selection for today, August 2, 2020, in thousands of churches all over the country this miracle is being discussed today. Some will emphasize the supernatural element; some will talk about it as a sort of sacramental model; others will see it as an example of Jesus teaching the importance of sharing whatever you have with others. And so on and on.

Each of these many ways of engaging with the miracle will be a unique product of many different factors: the character and training of the person at the pulpit; the

expectations of the different congregations; the doctrinal requirements of the various denominations. Being human engagements with the material, each will have human motivations: piety, nervousness, pride, ambition and all the rest.

In other words, each will be a unique and living thing, each with a new life that begins today, and each wending its way through the various futures of everyone involved.

A few weeks ago, we talked about how the parables of Jesus are not simply bits of fiction offered to carry a moral, but rather slices of life offered for our spiritual nourishment and evolution.

In a similar way, the miracles of Jesus are not simply historical events that had specific consequences over time. They are themselves seeds sown into the world, with ever growing and ever changing consequences, as they enter into and influence the lives of all who come after.

For this particular message, in this particular church, on this particular morning, it will be a miracle of humility and comfort.

Although they differ in many details, all four of the Gospel accounts of this miracle have something in common. A large crowd is gathered to hear Jesus as the day turns into evening. At a certain point the disciples ask Jesus how the crowd might be fed, and Jesus tells them to provide the food. When the disciples publicly acknowledge their own inability to do so, Jesus then proceeds to solve the problem.

We've all known people, I'm sure, either in a business, or in a social grouping, or an office or even in a family, perhaps even in a church...people who serve as the lynchpin of the whole operation, people who hold everything together, as we say. And I'm sure we could all provide examples of what happens when that central person is removed from the scene, for whatever reason; what happens then, whether immediately or by a slow process of drift, is that the original group or business, whatever it is, falls apart, goes under, comes unglued.

As that key person, as that lynchpin, is to some particular organization, that's what Jesus is to all of creation.

By the time Paul was writing to the Colossians a few decades later, this central understanding of who Jesus was and is had been fully understood. Speaking of Jesus, Paul reminds them:

"For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Col. 1: 16-17).

We all remember the occasion recounted in the third chapter of Acts, where Peter and John, are walking one morning to the temple and they encounter a lame beggar at the main gate. And Peter famously says: “I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (v. 6)

And while the man still clings to him in gratitude and the crowd gasps in astonishment, Peter tells them: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us. As though by our own power or piety we have made him well...the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.” (vv 12. 16)

The apostles had learned their lesson well, the lesson Jesus has taught them explicitly in His final discourse, recorded in the 15th Chapter of John:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And I think in many ways this is the hardest lesson of all to learn in the Christian life.

I don't mean by that that it's hard to learn how to say it or even preach it. We say it all the time, in a thousand different ways. Jesus is the source of my strength, Jesus is my one hope, He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of all creation, my Lord and Savior etc etc. The words flow easily and in abundance.

But do we really take them seriously?

For years I've spent a lot of time with hospice patients, and, especially in the residence, you often see people who, when they first move in, are able to get around on their own and take care of their own needs, feed themselves, hold a pleasant conversation, even tell jokes about their predicament.

But then almost always those people begin to slow down and become weaker. Often their minds begin to wander. And very often there comes a period of time when they are completely dependent on the aides and nurses. They have to be fed and cleaned and given medicine and moved from one place to another...and all of that must be done for them, every single little thing, and the nurses and aides are the ones who do it. Who do it all for them.

Apart from them, apart from the aides and the nurses, they can do nothing.

So my question as we close is this: How many of us truly realize the truth, and appreciate the truth, and live and walk in the light of the truth, that Jesus is to each one of us, now, today, what those nurses and aides are to those patients as they are crossing the final bridge?

You give them something to eat, Christ tells His students, His disciples. And their answer is, and must be, and always will be, **We** can't. **We** can't.

In the end, life eventually brings every single person to that realization: our own helplessness. In the end, every knee must bow.

But the good news is, once we bow that knee, whether soon or late, Christ will pick us up.

In another place, Christ opens His welcoming arms by saying, not, Come to me, all who are strong and self-reliant. He says, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

We are all weary and burdened. The blindness that Jesus cured so often in other miracles is spiritual as well as physical, a spiritual blindness to our final and complete dependence on Christ.

And so, as we prepare our hearts and minds for today's communion meal, let's remember that Christ provides, and is, the Bread of Life. Without Him, outside of Him, although we live, we have no life. And let our prayer for this morning, gracious God, be to open our hearts and minds to the one and true source of our

strength, of our goodness, and of our life, for it is in His own name, Jesus Christ, that we pray.