

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. Ps.150 Rom.9:1-5 Matt.14:13-21

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church August 2, 2026

As I have admitted to you before, sometimes the life of faith is for me something like looking at the “Where’s Waldo?” books. Probably most of you have seen these books, which chronicle the meandering of a funny little guy named Waldo as he travels around the world. The object of the book is to travel with Waldo as he visits places like the beach, the ski slope, the train station, the airport and such, and to find him in each picture amidst thousands of other people and the myriad of stuff characteristic of that place.

So, for example, in the picture of the airport, the reader has to try to find Waldo somewhere in the mix of the crowds, planes, busses, trucks, baggage and general craziness. The only helpful hint the reader has in their search for Waldo being his red and white striped shirt, his red-tasseled hat, his backpack and walking stick...

A hint made more difficult by the fact that many of the other people in the various scenes are also wearing Waldo’s colors of red and white. For some of us, the search for Waldo can take a long time. Usually the older the person, the longer it takes. I know this from experience.

So truth be told, I quite regularly look at the world in which we live and ask the faith version of the “Where’s Waldo?” question, which is “Where’s God?” Perhaps even more so in these days when

everything seems to be falling apart environmentally, culturally, nationally, globally... “Where is God?” I sometimes ask myself... “What are the signs by which I might recognize God’s presence in the midst of all the turmoil and war and suffering? Is there something like Waldo’s red and white striped shirt, his red-tasseled hat, his backpack and walking stick by which I might be able to recognize God, and so exclaim with the same satisfaction I feel when finding Waldo, ‘Ah! There’s God!’”

As is sometimes the case when I bring such an unresolved question to the texts appointed for a Sunday morning, after a good deal of wrestling and pondering, something comes clear... As it did this past week in my wrestling with our Gospel text, which is of course, Matthew’s telling of the story of the Feeding of the 5,000... which is, by the way, one of the few miracle stories told in all four Gospels. Matthew even tells it twice.

Clearly there is something the Gospel writers want us to know or see in this story. Clearly there is a revelation of God worth pondering if it’s included five times in the short space of four Gospels. What is that revelation? What do the Gospel writers want us to see? Where might they want us to look in the story for a glimpse of God?

Are they suggesting that God is present in that moment when two fish and five loaves are put into a black hat, and out comes enough of both to feed the thousands? **Is it in the miraculous moment of multiplication that God is seen most clearly?**

As I’ve pondered these questions, I’ve found some helpful insights in a story told by Alice Downs in her book “Bread for our Lives.” It’s a story about an oncologist in central New Jersey named Michael

Nissenblatt who brought to his profession not only his medical expertise, but also a spirit of care nurtured by the traditions of Judaism. One of those traditions is the Friday evening “Shabbat” - a meal that always includes the blessing and sharing of a braided white bread known as challah.

So as Alice Downs tells the story, she explains how on one Friday in 1993, Dr. Nissenblatt bought a loaf of challah on his way to the hospital where he was planning to check on his patients. One of his patients, an elderly woman with multiple myeloma, was suffering from a great deal of pain. And he saw that this woman, who was an observant Jew, was losing hope, fearing that all she had to look forward to was more pain and more suffering.

As Alice Downs writes, *“Her despair triggered a response in Dr. Nissenblatt – a response from the very core of his being. He excused himself and went to the hospital’s parking garage where he retrieved the challah. And then returning to his patient’s room, he gave her the challah, and she accepted it from his hands as a symbol of life and hope...”*

It seems that soon after that encounter, Dr. Nissenblatt began to buy extra challahs on Friday, and to give them to his Jewish patients... Leading one of his non-Jewish patients to ask him one day why he gave loaves of bread only to certain people. That question prompting him to give a challah every Friday to all his patients regardless of their religion, as every one of his patients seemed to crave the hope and life the bread symbolized.

Before long Dr. Nissenblatt was giving away as many as fifty loaves each Friday, making pick-up and delivery on his own impossible. So two men who had lost their wives to cancer volunteered to pick up loaves at a local bakery and distribute them on his behalf. Over a

number of years, more than 20,000 challahs were given away, each one representing an immeasurable quantity of hope.

As Alice Downs concludes her testimony to the miracle of the loaves she writes, *"I know Dr. Nissenblatt's story because I am a frequent visitor to the gravely ill patients in the same cancer unit at the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. Whenever I pass the nurses' station, I look up at a photograph hanging there: it captures one of thousands of moments of love and hope. The patient in the photograph, a Columbian woman with breast cancer, was undergoing a difficult preparation for a bone marrow transplant. She spoke no English. At first, she could not comprehend why the doctor was offering her a loaf of bread. There was a struggle to communicate. Finally understanding dawned, and the photograph captures a luminous spirit of promise as she reaches up to receive her challah from Dr. Nissenblatt's hands. For me, this powerful picture has become a constant reminder of the beauty of hope that is offered through the ordinary stuff of life."*

This too is a story about bread. About the multiplication of loaves. About hungry people being fed; in this case, people hungry for hope. So where is God in this story?

Silence

Matthew situates the story of the feeding of the five thousand in a very unusual place in his Gospel. We get an inkling that something is wrong in the first verse of our text for this morning as Matthew writes,

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”

“What had Jesus heard,” we might ask, “that caused him to need time alone, time out, in a ‘deserted’ place; a place in Scripture that always denotes a certain sense of struggle?”

What Jesus had just heard was that John the Baptist’s head had become the door prize at Herod’s birthday party. Because John had spoken truth to power... and as we know, prophets who critique powerful people often have trouble hanging onto their heads.

So Jesus had just heard this sobering news. And if there had been any question in his mind about what he was up against in his mission to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind, very suddenly it all became very clear.

So Jesus got in a boat by himself, crossing over to a deserted place, hoping to think things through I would imagine. Or to pray. Or scream. Or weep. Or to ask the “divine” version of the “Where’s Waldo” question, as in, “So where the heck are you God?”

But, as Matthew tells us, the crowds got wind of Jesus’ plan, figured out where he was going, and walked to that very place, where they waited for him to come ashore. And when he did, says Matthew, despite his own agony of heart and mind, Jesus had *compassion* for them...

“Compassion” meaning “suffering with.” The American sign language for the word being a kind of upward motion from the gut to the heart, where the heart is touched, I dare say pierced, followed by a circular motion of the hand in an expression of empathy and care toward the one who stands in front of you... Indicating, perhaps, that showing compassion means a willingness to be fully engaged from gut

to heart in accompanying love for the sake of the other; a willingness to have one's heart pierced by another's pain...

Indicating, perhaps, that compassion has more to do with relinquishment and subtraction and division than it has to do with miraculous multiplication. Indicating perhaps, where we might look for God in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and in the stories of our own lives...

Like in the story of Dr. Nissenblatt and the loaves of challah he multiplied for the cancer patients on the cancer ward of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital... Think for a moment about where in that story you caught a glimpse of God.... "In the 20,000 loaves" would be an appropriate response to the question... Why, it sounds like a miracle! A story worthy of front-page news.

But I would suggest that the loaves speak of something even more powerful and miraculous. Something involving a full engagement of Dr. Nissenblatt's gut and heart followed by a circular motion of his hand in an expression of empathy toward the ones who stood or lay in hospital beds before him.

Which brings us back to the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and the question of where we see God in that story. Or where the five thousand men plus women and children saw God as the story unfolded before them. And what I want to suggest is this...

I want to suggest that most of the folks who went to that deserted place that day to be healed of their diseases brought something to eat with them.... Not enough for the whole day perhaps, but something... I mean, who wouldn't? Would you head to Mt.

Katahdin or the Allagash Wilderness Waterway without a bag lunch? Of course not. But you know, as the day wears on you eat half a sandwich or an apple. You snack a bit on raisins and trail mix, until at the end of the day there are a few crackers, an assortment of nuts and a quarter of a sandwich at the bottom of the bag...

I think it's what the five thousand men plus women and children who followed Jesus into the wilderness did. And then, after they had spent the day witnessing Jesus' compassion for the sake of those who were in need of healing, they saw him take what little food he and the disciples had in their own bag lunch – two fish and five loaves... **They saw him take it, bless it, break it and share it. They saw him break open, divide, subtract and distribute. And in the mathematics of such love, they were filled with the presence of something so powerful it threatened to undo them... a presence so deep and real and true, they dared break open their own lunch bags and add to the baskets of bread and fish whatever they had...**

It may have been the first church pot-luck ever... a potluck of miraculous multiplication not unlike that of Dr. Nissenblatt's, as the two husbands who had lost their wives to breast cancer witnessed his compassion, and were moved to take over the distribution of loaves on Fridays to Dr. Nissenblatt's patients on the cancer ward.

*Which means that before it was a miracle of multiplication it was a miracle of division and subtraction and relinquishment and distribution... **and in the midst of such relinquishment, there was God...*** The God we come to know in Jesus. The God we find in Jesus, who summarized in these gestures of breaking and dividing and subtracting and relinquishing and sharing, his own life, and along with it, the mathematics of love...

So the question, “where’s God?” leads us to look in places gods don’t usually tend to dwell. It leads us to hints, like Waldo’s red-striped shirt, that are hard to find and see in the cacophony of so much hunger and war, so much abusive politicking in the halls of power and so much suffering among those who have none... not to mention the “so much lostness” of our own lives in the complexities of family issues, medical problems, financial worries, emotional stresses and strains...

In all of these places, to the question, “where’s God?” we find the answer in the words “accompanying love”... in the word “compassion”... in the gesture that reaches upwards from the gut to the heart and outwards to the world... In the mathematics of division and subtraction and relinquishment, which when done in love, becomes the miracle of multiplication.... As one theologian has said, “In the story of the loaves and fishes, the miracle isn’t that all of a sudden there was enough food to go around. The miracle is that somebody shared.” That’s where we find God....

Dear Friends, the good news is that in Christ Jesus God shows up right in front of us and speaks a word of accompanying love, a word of compassion and mercy and grace. In Jesus we don’t have to go looking for God at all, because God comes looking for us at the font, at the table, in the scriptures and in prayer, in hospital rooms and halls of power and in all manner of deserted places. God comes looking for us and says, “take and eat, this is my body, broken for you... shared with you...”

And there God makes God’s mark on us (*show American Sign Language sign for “compassion.”*) There God makes God’s mark on us (*show the sign of the cross on the forehead*). There God makes God’s mark on us (*show the downward and outward movement on the cross*),

and sends us out to be bread for the world, to share what we have with the one who sits next to us on the grass or on the bus or at the lunch room table...

Which reminds me of a question printed on the message board outside Essex Street Baptist Church in Bangor one Advent season that said, "What if God is looking for a sign from us?"

And I wonder... Would God find a sign of God's own presence if God looked in the places where we live and move and have our being? Would God see us practicing the mathematics of love? If the characteristic sign of identity for Christians, like Waldo's red and white striped shirt, is the sign for compassion, would God find such a sign among us? Would there be loaves broken and divided and relinquished and shared, enough to go around, with some left over?

Wouldn't it be a miracle if it was so? Wouldn't it be Christmas and Easter all rolled up into one? Wouldn't people see God all over the place, and wouldn't it be the craziest kind of math ever...where multiplication comes by way of division and subtraction, and fullness of life comes by way of love?

Shall we try it? In the name of Jesus, shall we open our brown bag lunches, and do a little crazy math and see what happens? Because after all, what if the world is looking for a sign from us?