

The Haydenville Congregational Church
Open Hearts + Open Minds + Open Doors
August 2, 2009~~10:00 AM
Carol Rinehart

Let us take a moment to pray May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Those of you attended First Churches last Sunday heard Pastor Matilda preach on the same scripture passage Tony has just read to us. We illustrate the beauty of scripture as it inspires richly varied insights. We could have a year of sermons on the loaves and fishes with still more to discover.

The feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water are core events in the history of Jesus' life. Clearly so, because the events are reported in three of the four Gospels. Passed down through the emerging community of followers of Christ, Matthew and Mark were written about 40 years after Jesus lived. Our scripture reading today provides the Gospel of John's version from something more like a 70-year perspective. The Gospel of John is particularly mystical and filled with metaphors, so that each detail invites examination much as we might examining the implications of details in a dream. Rich with imagery and metaphors, the story invokes a starburst of meanings. The images shimmer in our mind's eye and the story touches our hearts. The truth behind these two amazing moments in Jesus ministry, as John presents it is that Jesus' miracles confirmed to all that Jesus is the Messiah.

It strikes me, as I read John, that he is telling a story of the way Jesus, knowing his time would be short, used these miracles to develop his disciples' capacity to carry his work forward as quickly as possible. These are stories about disciple development. And what was his method? Providing experiences that continuously emphasized his message: that anybody wanting to follow this new way should be prepared for a constant flow of mind bending moments. Old ways of seeing things would have to die away. Disciples of this mystic, this healer, this visionary for a just world, would have to break open assumptions of what is "normal" and be open to mystery and amazement and turn upside down their understanding of "the way things are ". Discipleship training was—and is for us--an exercise in being born again into a new sense of what is possible.

Someone once gave me a gag gift of this Jesus action figure. The joke is that I actually keep it on my home altar. The Jesus story is about action, after all. See how the arms bend. The story of Jesus is about bending—mind bending—in the name of love, non-violence, forgiveness, and compassion. It is about bending the mind toward seeing God as a loving parent. It is about bending our instincts to press for healing in every encounter.

The stories of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water are told with an eye to the disciples' experience. The disciples ended up with twelve baskets of

left over food (one per disciple). The challenge was laid before them: “Are you ready to be fruitful? Are you learning to give gifts of literal and soul nourishment? Can you be peace in the midst of deep waters?”

As aspiring disciples, these guys probably found they had signed up for way more than they could have anticipated in their wildest imagination. Sometimes we find ourselves in the same position, right? When we are seized by a blend of love and vision and a deep inner knowing that this is where we are called to be, our hearts fly up and we step forward, our faith-filled imagination tugging our sluggish, habit-bound minds forward.

“Truth” becomes far greater than whether a miracle actually happened. The implications of these stories for our own lives sink in when we just allow them to settle into our hearts and minds and imaginations.

So let’s bend our imaginations. Imagine how a disciple’s email home might read:

Dear Mom,

It’s been quite a week in Lake Galilee. This is a pretty amazing discipleship-training program. I’ve told you about this man, Jesus, who speaks about—and acts on—a belief in the power of Love, and peace beyond all understanding. He is a true healer beyond anything I’ve ever seen the other healers around here able to do. He says this healing capacity is in all of us, if we can open ourselves wide enough, learn how to love generously enough and transform our fears to faith enough.

So, as you know, I’m in this discipleship training with eleven other guys who feel like I do: this man has touched our dreams that a different world is possible! It is possible for our people to break free from the oppressions they suffer not through violence, rather by learning to break free from small mindedness and punishing practices. People are suffering. They are hungry and frightened. Jesus says another life is possible if they--if we--can learn to operate on this whole different level of generous love and faith in this God who Jesus tells us is like a loving parent instead of being a demanding God who is a judging, angry and punishing force. It’s amazing to hear Jesus pray: he prays in conversation to his “abba”—“daddy”; and he assures us that our seeing him in this wonderful relationship with God means we can have that too!

But boy, this discipleship training is not easy. Jesus sends us out to teach people. We talk with people about how to stop believing that God rewards only people who are good enough, as if sickness and poverty are signs that you aren’t good enough in God’s eyes. We are trying to help people get it through their heads that God’s love and healing is for everyone.

Jesus is teaching us how to do this through actions, not just words. One way we do this is through food—feeding the hungry and eating with all kinds, breaking up class barriers about who can eat with whom. Jesus is training us to help people understand that, when they “get it” that they are beloved of God, all kinds of “impossible” conditions are healed.

I'm here to tell you that getting it that we are beloved of God is easier said than done. I keep bumping up against my own old ways of thinking, most easily summed up as "Not possible!"

So here are a couple of examples from this past week. We've been out teaching and talking to people, sometimes we go out to witness Jesus who has a way of simply seeing into people who come to him so fully and so deeply that he seems to draw out their disease and touch an inner place of wholeness in them. Other times we are sent out in small groups to teach and talk with people, maybe practice seeing fully and deeply into people who are hurting ourselves.

So anyway, a few nights before the Passover we decided to take a break and go up into the hills to rest. By the time we got there hundreds of people were gathering. They came without any thought of preparation or planning. I was annoyed and dismayed, feeling like "Can't Jesus ever get a rest?" But we could just see in his eyes that he was moved by the intensity of the need, and of the hope in the people who came. He turned to us and said, "Time for you to learn the power of God's abundant love. These people need to eat and we can't send them away. Go see what people have brought to share." We came back with five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish. Back home that would be the equivalent of a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on soggy out-dated Wonder Bread. So Jesus prays over the sandwiches and starts breaking off pieces for people. He hands each of us disciples a piece, broken off, and tells us to start passing out little chunks from our small bits and instruct people to pass their bits along in the same way. We keep doing this and we never run out. One of the guys said it reminded him of working in an orchard where no matter how many grapes they picked they never ran out. And Jesus responded that we should remember that generous love bears fruit that way. When we start cleaning up leftovers we find that each one of the twelve disciple trainees has a basketful that we are now called to take out and share as we go back to where we will sleep the night.

Jesus is still surrounded by people, but he says to go on ahead to the place on the other side of the lake where we are to stay the night. We decide to take one of the boats across instead of walking around the lake even though it is getting dark. We know Jesus will catch up with us in his own time. The wind is high; we're tired; this is taking much longer than we expected it would because of fog. Things are feeling kind of out of control and worrisome anyway when one of the guys cries out "What is that?" And here's Jesus walking along side of us. People are freaking out—some are sure they are nuts; others are afraid Jesus has died and this is his ghost; others think they themselves must have died. So here we are, about to get our minds further bent, because Jesus just calls out, "Relax. I'm here with you. Have a little faith. You're safely held in the boat of God's love for you." And with that we find we are on solid ground. People aren't quite sure what happened there, but we are walking more lightly. Less afraid, we seem to have come to a new place of peace and trust.

So, the discipleship training continues. Some days are pretty exciting; some are pretty unnerving. But somehow I'm changing. I find that food has become more than just

food—every time I eat it or share it, I see it as something for everyone, that expands and multiplies and nourishes even the soul. I no longer see stormy times as fearsome, or get that drowning feeling of anxiety that once burdened me when I thought about all the pain and suffering around. I'm lighter as I remember Jesus's words, "Relax. You'll get through this storm. I'm walking here with you and you are safely held in the boat of God's love."

Well, Mom, gotta go now. Off to another wild week of discipleship training. I don't know where this will take me. All I can say is, every day I am asked to face my limited ways of seeing things and to bend my mind and heart to arc like a rainbow toward kindness and compassion in all its forms: to share the nourishing fruits of life with every one I meet, to draw forth people's wholeness with healing acts of faith and love at every level. Jesus is teaching me that all things are possible when we allow our hearts to fly up and we step out, our faith tugging our sluggish habit-bound minds forward.

More from Lake Galilee next week.

Love you,
John.

In the name of Jesus the mind bender and disciple-maker. Amen