

If I gave titles to sermons I'd call this one the Love of Power Vs. the Power of Love. It is the main conflict and main theme of the Bible and it's found its place in countless pieces of literature. Stories like Crime and Punishment draw on it - coming down on the side of the power of love. Nietzsche wrote about it - coming down on the side of the love of power. Recently the Harry Potter series is built upon it completely. Lord Voldemort and the forces of darkness have a love of power. Harry Potter and his friends go day to day with the power of love. The parallels between the Bible and the Harry Potter series have often been noted. In the time between the release of the 6th and 7th books many theologians and literary scholars pointed this out and also accurately pointed to the way the plot would develop, especially elements of death and resurrection; and the way the ultimate showdown plays out at the climax of the whole series.

Love is powerful, more powerful than anything. But the allure of power often captures people, and is always a major driving force in the world.

We have two miracles in our gospel reading for today. Feeding a crowd of thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, and walking on water may not seem at all connected, but our gospel writer John tells this miracle stories back to back because they are connected. Both are about the power of love.

In the feeding of the 5000 we directly see the conflict between the love of power and the power of love. Large crowds of people are following Jesus. He tries to get away for some peace and quiet but they follow anyway. Seeing the large crowds he has compassion on them. And rather than saying that everyone has to go back home and get something to eat, he decides to feed them.

He's playful with his disciples. Notice Jesus is the one who starts the challenge when he says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip answers very logically, "Six months' wages wouldn't buy enough to each of them to get a little." Andrew comes up with an idea, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish." Great idea Andrew... go ahead and steal a little boy's supper right in front of him.

But as this playful scene plays out we discover that the boy's supper is indeed commandeered by Jesus. Who knows what was going through the little boy's mind. Perhaps it was an honor to give his food to someone so important as Jesus. Perhaps he was upset. But ultimately his meagre supper is enough; enough to feed a crowd of many thousands. And don't overlook that there were leftovers. 12 baskets full of leftovers are collected - far more than they began with. And of course 12 is a number with symbolic significance; the number that symbolized completeness.

I say this every time I preach on this miracle story. This is no miracle of sharing. Sometimes it is said that the crowds really had meals stashed away and they decided to bring them out and share, and when everyone shares there turns out to be an abundance. But this story appears in all four gospel readings and each makes it clear that the food all comes directly from Jesus. Sharing makes for a sweet story about cooperation. But that misses the point.

The point is that people are hungry. They have needs. Jesus provides for all to have their fill. And the people recognize something very important. Jesus isn't just some guy who can stretch a food budget farther than anyone else. Think

about connections between this miracle and Old Testament stories. Think back to Moses leading the people out of slavery from Egypt and into the Promised Land. They spend forty years in the wilderness. Where does their food come from? Do they buy it from Wegmans? Do they grow crops? Not in the Sinai Peninsula! Do they steal it? From whom, there's no one there!

No, every day God provides food. If you know the story well you'll remember that a thin flaky bread-like food called manna appears on the ground each and every day. All the people have to do is go out and pick it up. And at night quails come and cover the camp. The people just had to go and get them. Bread and meat every day at no cost and almost no effort. What a deal.

Also, remember what happened if the people tried to hoard the manna? It went bad the next day. There was no possibility of leftovers. In the Exodus story this is so that the people trust in God more fully. Day by day they had to believe God would provide. Saving up for safety sake didn't work.

So, put in the background of your mind Moses and the people in the wilderness and food miraculously appearing, and then bring to the front of your mind Jesus and thousands of people in

a wilderness place and food miraculously coming. You see the parallels? But also notice the big difference. The manna in the wilderness couldn't be saved. Twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered at Jesus' feeding.

If you're there and you're an Israelite who knows the Exodus story you're getting really excited! This Jesus guy is bigger than Moses. He has more power and authority than even Moses, the greatest hero in your nation's history. You sense that big stuff is going to be happening. And so what do the people do? They plan to take him by force and make him king. But Jesus withdraws again to a mountain by himself.

The love of power or the power of love? Jesus shows no love of power. Power is to serve, not for personal gain.

The second miracle story in our gospel almost seems small by comparison, but again it is Jesus showing power out of love. This story may confuse us if we know the other stories of Jesus with the Sea of Galilee. You'll remember a few weeks ago we had Jesus still a storm that was threatening to sink the disciples' boat. And there is the other story where Jesus walks on water and invites Peter to come out and join him.

The story in John appears to combine some elements of both stories - here there's a storm and walking on water. Now we could have a whole scholarly discussion about what historical events really are behind all these stories, but that would be to miss the point. Our gospel writer John wants to get a point across that strengthens the lesson from the Feeding of the 5000. Jesus has the power over the wind and the waves. Jesus can walk on water so that he has power over gravity too. And he says something very interesting, which we lose in translation. Our translations say that the disciples were terrified in the wind and seeing Jesus coming to them on the water, but he says, "It is I, do not be afraid." It would be better translated as, "I Am. Do not fear."

What is the name God tells Moses to use in the Exodus story? "I Am." And so here Jesus uses that name for himself. And though Moses and the Israelites were terrified by God's presence, here Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

In the face of this mighty power the disciples are told not to fear. Why? Because it is the power of love, not the love of power. Jesus always uses power to support love. He does not hope to gain by power.

May the power of love drive you, and not the love of power. For the love of power leads to death. The power of love may cause sacrifice, hardship, and maybe even death. But it is the greatest power. And as the resurrection shows, the power of love is ultimately greater even than death.

May God's love bless you and empower you every moment of every day. Amen