

“Pita Piety”  
Mark 6:30-44  
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“Jesus said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” What an ironic beginning to a story about food with no end. We know very well this story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, how the disciples want to take the easy way out and send the crowds on their way to fend for themselves, and how Jesus looked up to heaven, and “blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people...And all ate and were filled,” and twelve baskets were left over. Maybe we know it too well and so we look at the multiplication of the loaves and think that’s the miracle, and what a nice story it is, and move on to the next verses.

Well, it is no longer a secret in the world of Biblical scholarship that the miracle stories weren’t recorded in the gospels as a means to convert people. Instead, the miracles are included to confirm the faith of the early Christian community, to express and clarify what this new religion was all about. The miracle stories aren’t included so much to amaze but to say something about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit. What I want you to know is that when you read a miracle story in the gospels, the real miracle is NOT the one performed by Jesus. The real miracle is always the grace of God revealed in the story.

In our story tonight, the miracle is not that five loaves fed more than ten thousand people. The miracle is not even that there were 12 baskets left over! No, the miracle in this story is that God invites us to be involved in God's work in the world, that we are not bystanders in the life of faith, that we can find strength to serve even when we have "no leisure even to eat." The miracle in this story is that God call us to a life of interaction, intersection and interference, to a life that interacts with God, to a life that intersects with other people, to a life which interferes when evil and sin threaten to overwhelm the world. The miracle is that God calls us into "being" Christians.

Of course, this begs the difficult question, what does it mean to BE a Christian? We have a hunch that it is not adherence to doctrines or tenets or beliefs. We have an intuition that it is more than just church membership. We experience God, and pray to God, and give of our time and talent for God, but what is it to be a follower of Christ? If, as the famous hymn says, "they will know we are Christians by our love," what shape does that love take? I want to suggest tonight that it is wedge-shaped, because we are called to practice a pita piety. In honor of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, I present to you this round of pita bread, a variation of which very likely made its way into the mouths of the crowd that day! We are quite accustomed to thinking of bread as the stuff you pull out from a plastic bag and spread peanut butter all over, but what we have before us is perhaps

a little more like what Jesus blessed and broke on that evening in the desert.

Besides, I just couldn't see calling this sermon "Bimbo Piety."

So the pita is before us, and now it is time to bring forth the piety! Oh no!, Not piety! Not piety, which conjures up notions of condemnatory, buttoned-up, self-righteous little people who walk around with little clipboards taking notes on the immoral behavior of others, judging what is right or wrong, and maybe even leaking it to the press. Not piety, which smacks of falseness when televangelists fall from grace with tears in their eyes, or their hand in the till. Not piety, which too often ends up as contemplative navel gazing at the expense of alleviating profound suffering. When we use the word pious to describe someone today, it is not generally offered up in a positive sense. But I think that it's high time we liberate the word piety from its rather unfortunate connotations, and I have just the man for the job.

His name is Edward Farley who was at one point a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, although before my time. Now you should know that Ed Farley is the bane of second year theological students at PTS because one of his more recent books called "Good and Evil" is required reading in the Christology course. Now you might think that with a title as simple as "Good and Evil," this book might hold some promise. It is, in fact, one of the densest books I've ever read and seems to have very little to do with good and evil, except in the way

people react to it. I have never, and I mean never, fallen asleep more often reading any one book. I pretty much vowed never to read Ed Farley again.

So don't ask me how it got there, but one of Ed Farley's earliest works called "Requiem for a Lost Piety," found its way to my bookshelf. It was apparently written before he decided to torture Seminary students. This book is plainly written, in nice, easy to understand words like these: "piety is that which unifies the specific acts and attitudes of the Christian life. A person's piety is a pattern of being and doing that arises out of a specific interpretation of the gospel. In other words, piety is the concrete way we live out our faith in God." Translation: Our piety is the way we shop and the way we pray and the way we raise our children, and the way we watch TV, it's the outward expression of our inward conviction.

In this book, Ed Farley discusses the demise of Protestant piety. The old pieties have not kept pace, and in the absence of authentic pieties that meet the needs of people in their own time and place, other secular and false pieties take their place. The Protestant church has become directionless, or worse, wrongly directed, because the concrete ways in which Christians lived their lives were taken out from underneath them, by things like the Internet and globalization, to name just a couple. It is not my intention to offer a thorough book review of Ed Farley's "Requiem for a Lost Piety," so you'll have to trust me that his points are right on the money. For now, I want to use his definition of piety and his charge to the

church to work hard at developing a piety which is authentic and viable and worshipful in our own time.

To take up that charge, we must start with the Bible. Which of course leads us straight to our passage in Mark's gospel, because not only is it a great and memorable story, but because it says something meaningful about the foundations of a Christian piety. You've heard of slices of wisdom? Wisdom I have none, but I will offer you three wedges of pita piety cut from the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Looking again at the story we see that it is getting late, people are getting hungry and tired, after listening to Jesus teach all afternoon. And the disciples have probably been playing riot police all afternoon and they just want this ordeal to be over and they say to Jesus, "Get these people out of here! We want some peace and quiet." And Jesus tells the disciples to feed all these people. And the disciples' reply, of course, is the classic line "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" Now you may see this differently, but what I see is the disciples giving up, copping out, taking a rather defeatist attitude. They seem to have lapsed into a paralyzed hopelessness, not believing they can do anything about the situation except spend their hard earned money. But Jesus doesn't play that game. He explodes their piety of hopelessness as he takes the mundane, a loaf of pita, and their denial, and transforms them, demonstrating that with God, all things are indeed possible. As he breaks the loaves, he is breaking the

hopelessness of the moment, transforming it, opening it to new possibilities. Pita  
piety wedge #1: Our piety must take seriously the transformative power of the  
gospel: not in the sense of specific miracles, but in the sense that God has given us  
what we need to be transformative in the world. We need to live as if  
transformation is more than a possibility, that it is a certainty. We must live  
transformed lives and call out for the transformation of whatever seems hopeless  
and paralyzing.

Often in this passage we overlook what is perhaps the key to the passage.  
When the disciples suggest Jesus send away the people, listen to what he says:  
“You give them something to eat,” and listen to what happened once Jesus breaks  
the bread: “he gave the loaves to the disciples, to set before the people.” “You give  
them something to eat.” “You give them something to eat.” And they did. I’m a  
firm believer in the economy of the Bible, that extra stuff is not in there for the  
sake of embellishment. So when it says that the disciples gave the loaves to the  
crowd, it is important for us to take note. If you take out that line this is how it  
reads: “Jesus blessed and broke the loaves and all ate and were filled,” and the  
disciples become mere bystanders. But no, the disciples have a specific role in this  
drama. They take what God has blessed and offer it to the people. Pita Piety wedge  
#2: Our piety must recognize that God transforms us to empowered service, not  
grudging servitude. We must live as though we actually believe that God has made  
us partners in transforming the world.

This passage is often noted for its resemblance to the story of the Last Supper, because much of the language is the same. But in this story, there is something going on that doesn't happen in the other one, and I think it is worth noting. In the miracle story, the meal is shared among ten thousand people in the middle of the desert, not just with thirteen in an upper room in Jerusalem. I'm not trying to take away anything from the story that brings us to the table tonight. But I do want to suggest that in our story tonight, Jesus is setting the stage for the shape of our mission, making wider the circle of those invited to participate in the Kingdom of Heaven. Pita Piety wedge #3: Our piety must take seriously the call to community, to sitting together at table, to sharing the most basic of human needs with all who hunger. We must live knowing that our brothers and sisters sitting on either side of us eat bread too, even if it is shaped differently than our own. Some eat it by the loaf, some eat it by the wedge, some eat it flat, some eat rolled up, some use it to eat! But all eat and many still need to be fed.

We started with a miracle and perhaps that is the best place to end as well. As I said before, the miracle of this story is not how five loaves became enough for everyone, but that God takes us in and uses us to bring hope, and mercy, and justice and maybe even a little bread to those who need it. As we come to the table again tonight, may we experience the miracle of grace once again. And may our piety, our pattern of being as followers of Christ, find its source and power in that miracle. Amen.