

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
PENTECOST 8 (P12B), JULY 12, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
«An Ordinary Picnic!»

John 6:1-21 (NRSV)

How many of you remember these words to an old song?

There'll be trains of blossoms  
There'll be trains of music  
There'll be trains of trust, trains of golden dust  
Come along and surry on sweet trains of thought

These are, of course, some of the lyrics to a song from 1968 titled “Stone Soul Picnic.” The song was by The 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension. It was about a picnic.

A few weeks ago we had a wonderful picnic. It was a Parish Picnic at the home of Frances Huber. We had blossoms; we had music; we had trust and sweet trains of thought. And we had lots of wonderful food! If you missed it, check our website for the pictures. It was in every way an “ordinary” picnic, and yet it was very special – a “stoned soul picnic” in many ways.

Our Gospel lesson today tells of a picnic that was a bit different than ours. We had planned ours for weeks ahead. But there were no long range plans for this one. Jesus simply invited his followers to go up into the hills for some rest and sharing.

The crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. They had seen the miracles. They hungered for his help in their own lives. And so they ran ahead to where his boat was docking so that he could help them. The Gospel says that Jesus saw the crowd, recognized a need, and organized a spur-of-the-moment picnic.

There is a two-part pattern for our lives in this experience. First, we notice that God uses the ordinary to meet God’s extraordinary purposes. The writer of the Gospel of John remembers how Jesus used a boy with a picnic lunch of five barley loaves and two fish. There was nothing unusual in the lunch. Bread and fish would be common food taken by anyone who expected to be gone from home for a whole day.

When confronted with 5,000 people, the text says that Jesus simply said “thanks” over the bread and fish and then the disciples distributed the simple fare to the crowds. I remember as a teenager I had my doubts about this event. So I went to my pastor and asked him if he thought this miracle really happened just as it was described. In other words, did Jesus literally multiply the bread and the fish like he changed water into wine?

My pastor answered, “Well, yes and no!” Yes and no? What the heck does that mean? He explained that Jesus probably knew that many people had done the same thing as the boy. They had brought something to eat with them. So when Jesus blessed the food and ordered it to be distributed, everyone who had brought a basket opened it up and shared with those who had brought nothing. And when all was said and done, there were 12 baskets of fragments left over. It kind of reminds me of a parish picnic, or a covered dish supper! God had once

again taken the ordinary and multiplied it to meet the needs of an extraordinary situation.

So the second part of the pattern is that God also increases and amplifies the ordinary to fulfill extraordinary purposes. For example, Jesus chose common, uneducated men to be his followers. Earlier, God had chosen Moses to lead a nation, even though Moses came up with a host of reasons why he could not be a leader. Even Paul, an educated man, felt unequal to the task of spreading the Good News, and yet he wrote what is now most of the New Testament.

Just before my vacation, a young woman named Laura came to interview me for an article that will appear in the Alleghany News. Like many people, she wanted to know how I got started in the ministry, where I had been, and what all I had done. It was a legitimate ego trip, I suppose.

I told her that I came from rather common Yankee stock, blue-collar folks and all that. I was an average student all the way through college, making B's and C's and a few A's. I got into the Episcopal Church because of a girl friend, and went to seminary because it seemed like an easier road than medical school. But early on God took this common boy and started using him for extraordinary things. It started with some trouble-shooting in parishes where no one else wanted to go. Then I learned sign language and was called to a ministry with the deaf that has lasted all through my life. Then I got sick and thought my working days were over, indeed maybe my life! But I have been kept alive long enough to help start two churches, and to design a search process used by this diocese until just recently. And now I seem "hooked" into the life of an Interim Rector. All this from a boy whose only claim to fame was that he could rebuild anyone's lawnmower! Truly, God increases and amplifies whatever it is that we have been given at the beginning.

Yes, you and I, chosen by God, will have weaknesses strengthened, doubts assured, fears overcome, and uncertainties erased, so that we in our humanness can fulfill the purpose God intends! In advance, we may never expect it to occur. While it is happening, we may never recognize its fulfillment. But when we give God the chance, our lives will fulfill the extraordinary purposes of God!

There are some who say that all of life is a "picnic." If by those words they mean that God supplies everything we need to accomplish extraordinary purposes, then I agree. If five loaves of bread and two fish can feed five thousand, if common people can become leaders of nations, if a common kid with a Pennsylvania Dutch heritage can be a priest for 42 years, if common bread and wine can become the body and blood of Christ, who are we to argue?

So, Surry down to a stoned soul picnic  
There'll be lots of time and wine  
Red yellow honey, sassafras and moonshine

Well, hey, that sounds like a picnic to me! Indeed, an extraordinary picnic!