

A sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Pentecost 12b / July 29, 2018
Ephesians 3:14-21 / John 6:1-21

Last Sunday, in Ireland, I took a break in between services to walk the streets of Dublin near the Cathedral Church where our choirs had sung that morning and were about to sing again that afternoon for Evensong.

I was keeping a pretty brisk pace, knowing I had to get back for the service. I was wearing a clerical collar, so my vocation was visible to anyone who saw me on the streets.

As I passed a pub with sidewalk tables, a white-haired gentleman caught my eye with a wave and said, "Reverend, we need your pa-rayers." I said to him, "What's that? What?"

It was noisy and I was thinking, *What's Paris got to do with anything?* He emphasized the first r a little more when he repeated his request. "We need your PRAYERS, Reverend. We don't need you. But we need your prayers."

“Well, you got ‘em,” I said, as I continued on.

Whatever the country, whatever your social status, whatever your age, there are times in your life when you could say something similar.

Should say something similar.

We all have times when, if honest, we know in our gut that we could use some help with what all we’re dealing with.

We face situations where we want to say to somebody, “We need your prayers.”

“My country needs your prayers.”

“My family needs your prayers.”

“*I* need your prayers.”

We come up against situations that remind us of our limits. Challenges we face make us worry about having all we need.

And we naturally wonder in such times how our faith in Christ can help us.

As I've said before, that's true for us in our largely middle-class community surrounding the Cathedral here. We spend a lot of time projecting an image. We conceal the yelling match we might have had with our kids or spouses on the drive in.

Or if we came by ourselves,
we might have a buried concern that we *don't*
have someone along with us.

And our young people!

I think particularly of some of you with adolescents who are fighting crushing anxiety. I think of the parents here walking with children who deal with debilitating depression, as I have, as a parent, with one of my children. And to you youth: I know that the pressures you feel at school, the isolation, the competitiveness, even meanness, leave you wondering how to cope.

Adulthood is not always a picnic, either. We may expend a lot of anxious energy. Getting angsty about whether we are

accomplishing enough. Worrying whether we really can afford the lifestyle we seem to have committed ourselves to.

I am intrigued by a book getting a lot of attention.

I'm especially struck by its title: *Squeezed*. Squeezed. The subtitle on the cover goes on to explain the book's premise:

“Why Our Families Can't Afford America.”

The author offers research and lots of everyday stories highlighting stresses like the high cost of raising kids amid a shifting job market and childcare and skyrocketing medical bills.

Some suggest that the outlook of the author seems a bit complainy. But the author makes a case that “middle-class families are running furiously and breathlessly just to find themselves staying in place.” She notes how, according to a poll, 65 percent of all Americans worry about paying their bills.” Well, maybe you do, too.

And young adult Americans face special stresses here. They have 300 percent more student loan

debt than their parents. Out of such pressures, they delay marriage and having kids later than generations before them, thinking that such milestones maybe are out of reach for now.

Whatever your age or stage in life, sometimes it seems like we don't have enough—enough money, enough energy, enough time.

We feel so pushed in our schedules that we experience a kind of what someone calls a *time poverty*, a sense of never having enough hours.

I share this list of challenges to set the stage for a remarkable promise embodied and embedded in our story from John's Gospel:

The story of the feeding of the five thousand. It's the only miracle of Jesus recorded by all four Gospel writers. That's how important it is.

And it's a miracle set against the question: *Will there be enough?* It is a miracle of provision.

A miracle of Christ's adequacy for what might
have seemed like scarcity.

It's a story of a difficult, seemingly unbudgeable
situation met with the
generosity and creativity of God.

For this God is not a vague force,
But loving, and powerful, kind and able.
A God who shows up smack in the middle of our
grubby little circumstances.

The feeding that day is about opened-up
prospects. About how there's more at hand that
first meets the eye. It's about enough, more than
enough, how when the pressure is on
we find can resources.

We see, first, though, Philip's helpless, hopeless,
pinched reply to Jesus' question about how they
will find the money to buy bread for the crowd.
All Philip can say is, "Six months' wages would
not buy enough bread for

each of them to get a little.”

That word “enough” carries a world of meaning. Here it means not completion and contentment, but fear, constriction, the nagging anxiety that there *won't be* enough. Things feel *squeezed*.

Now, Andrew, the other disciple in the story, has a more pragmatic approach.

Instead of feeling completely squashed into despair, he at least looks at what they have. *Five barley loaves and two fish*, he volunteers, found on the person of a boy in the crowd.

But then his nerve fails; he feels squeezed too. “What are they among so many people?” It can't be enough against a crowding horde.

What happens next becomes the decisive answer. For what both disciples soon see is the wildly important reality of God's resources.

God, who created the world, God, full of
inexhaustible creativity, God who made all things
and sustains them, will he run out?

Isn't he able to help when we are in a tight place?

We see lives not pushed down, but lives in which
new possibilities are now real,
more real than if all you relied on was your own
insight and ingenuity and energy.

Now, it's fashionable in some circles to downplay
and dismiss any possibility of the miraculous.

The feeding of the five thousand, for instance,
some say, happened because the generosity of the
little boy who had held up his lunch basket that
day encouraged others with hidden stashes of food
to open their hearts and share.

Well, I do believe that this story does indeed
encourage wonderful generosity in place of our
squeezed in tightness. Believe that there's enough

to go around, and you are likely to give with abandon, to not be so blasted careful and cautious.

But this habit we have as moderns of trying to wash out of such stories a hint of the supernatural blunts our wonder at what happened that day. Trying to explain away the miracle weakens our own expectancy for what God can do in us.

And through us.

Instead, what you see here can enlarge your capacity for wonder. Your confidence in a God not limited by any situation in your life.

The story gives an invitation to live a life that becomes more expansive, full of possibilities for what God can do where you have given up.

Let it also be a picture of how we as a church can be, as someone said,
a people of miraculous expectations.

I don't want to over-spiritualize our stresses and heartaches and terrors, or the everyday world of budgets and deadlines and strained friendships.

But the structure of my sermon is quite deliberate, to begin with our extremity and need, with the lacks we can experience, and then to say, there is help in Christ.
Oh, there is help in Christ.

Maybe you've gotten so caught up that you've forgotten. For all I teach and write about prayer, sometimes I have to remind myself of the vast and astonishing resources God places at our disposal when we turn to him in prayer and worship.

So, let this story redouble your resolve to pray your way through whatever you are facing. And then let Paul and what he wrote help you get a little more explicit about what to expect.

Look at what Paul says in today's reading. He speaks of the immeasurable greatness of God's

power. Doesn't that dwarf the scared response that turns you into a curled ball of despair.? Instead, he says, "be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit so we may have," as he says, "the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ."

He means not just knowing it in our minds, but also in our souls. That takes a lifetime, and beyond, to happen. But let today's story and Paul's word sink in and expand in you as hope.

Leonard Pitts is a syndicated columnist, an African American who often writes on social justice issues. One of his columns appeared in our local paper. He was stressing the validity of belief in God prayer in our secular times.

Prayer is not simply a refuge for the fearful or piously passive, he was saying.

And prayer, he wrote, is a "confession of one's own humble state." Life is full of challenges and

hard things, Pitts went on to say, but, quoting a preacher he heard, “prayer is not just a plea to get out of those trials.

It’s also a way of getting through.”

Well, you *do* get through, recalling how God has help for you. God has enough even for your limiting circumstances, beyond even your ability to imagine.