

Pentecost 8B

John 6: 1-21

26 July 2009

Christ Church Episcopal

The sun was just edging its way up over the horizon, the temperature hovered around 20 degrees, and a sharp wind was whipping around the corner as Steve's Mom and Dad stood in line to register him for Little League Baseball. Steve's Dad had played baseball in high school, and he was eager to share his knowledge and love of the game with his son.

The line of parents extended well into the parking lot; computer technology did not yet allow registration online. And, registration was only the first in a series of steps before Steve could take the field in a uniform to play in his first-ever baseball game.

How many of you have ever played youth sports? How many of you have coached? How many have been team moms? How many watch a child or grandchild play? Most of you know then, the glorious smell of hotdogs on the grill in the concession stand, the ubiquitous ring pops, the striped bags of

popcorn and the thrill of seeing a child get a base hit. If it's your child, of course. (Just kidding)

I'm guessing that some of you also know something of the tainted politics that sometimes go with Little League: coaches so driven by the need to win that they'll do just about anything to get the star players on their teams. Parents who live vicariously through their child's performance on the field, raising the level of pressure on the child to an intolerable level. And kids whose self-confidence takes a body blow when their coach gives them the message, "You're not good enough." "You don't have what it takes."

In case I sound a bit over-dramatic, let me explain: I'm not talking about college or high-school athletes, but kids as young as five years old.

I can remember when most neighborhoods had a vacant lot where children could get together and play ball on their own – for fun – without adult supervision. I played sports growing up, and in high school and college – but sometimes I wonder if organized youth sports dominate the lives of our children. Today's kids don't have nearly as many opportunities for free play as we did. And the stakes are higher. If your children hope to play on their high school baseball, basketball, soccer, or football team, you've got to start

them early, specialize, and play the sport year-round. The competition is very tough.

Steve's parents, waiting in line in the chill on this early January morning, were soon to discover this.

Steve was a player of below-average talent. At the tryouts, he popped out, and then struck out. He fielded the ball okay, but his throw to first base was weak and off-target. Steve's ability put him in about the 10th round of the draft. Depending on who his first coach was, Steve was in danger of being labeled as "no good" at age 6: a label that could stick with him throughout his years of Little League. Steve simply was not a star athlete – certainly not at the level his father had been.

My husband, David, had the privilege of coaching Steve. What he lacked in talent, this boy made up for in desire. At the beginning of the season, Steve swung the bat like a golf club and ran the bases like a middle-aged man. But as the season went on, he learned how to choose the right pitch, put the bat on the ball, and get on base. He started running the bases well, and he contributed to his team's offense. My husband's team didn't win

championship that year, but they did well. More important, Steve felt like he was a valuable – and valued – member of his team.

Steve gained self-confidence that year. He discovered that you don't have to have to be born with superior talent to contribute – you can learn to use what resources you do have.

Eventually, the youth sports leagues created travel teams for players who excel at a very high level. This is a good thing for the kids, whatever their level of talent. The star players move up to a more advanced style of baseball, and the Recreation League becomes less pressurized. I think it's easier on the parents, too.

Every coach enjoys having superior players. Their ability reflects well upon the coach, who enjoys a certain notoriety in having a good team. It is not as easy or glamorous to coach players like Steve – but it can be very rewarding.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches this important lesson to his disciples. People are more and more attracted to Jesus. Their number is growing. It is late and they are hungry and Jesus asks his disciples to feed them. They have no clue how to deal with this situation.

Jesus doesn't perform an instant miracle, though he certainly could have. Instead, he invites the disciples to assess the situation themselves. They don't have much to work with in feeding this huge crowd – only loaves of bread and fish for a family or two, certainly not for the thousands gathered in the grass.

We know the story so well. Out of minimal resources, the power of Christ creates nourishment for all. This well-known Gospel story illuminates Jesus' power to perform miracles, yes, but it also demonstrates the possibilities that exist within small things. In the power of God, it is possible to create abundance out of our own limited resources.

Let's face it: Most of us are not superstars. Life is challenging, and we are ordinary folk plodding our way along through as best we can. Our vision is finite; we cannot imagine that our meager resources of talent, skill, and faith can amount to much in the seemingly endless demands of life.

And yet, through our relationship in Christ, we are capable of so much more than we know! God empowers us to use what we have so well that its impact seems to multiply – it's like a miracle.

Our recent “God Will Provide” campaign is one example. Who would have thought in the worst economic period since the Great Depression, our parish could rally to find the resources necessary to keep vital ministries alive?

What other capabilities in us are left untapped? Suppose Jesus is asking us, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat” -- bread for the hungry in Haiti, Mexico, and other nations of suffocating poverty?

Or, how can we, in our imperfect wisdom, provide *spiritual* bread for our young, who so need solid ground on which to stand in the shifting tide of adolescence?

How are we to provide spiritual bread for the aging, who feel the loss of connection with community? How are we to provide spiritual food for those who have lost family, and job, and purpose?

Jesus shows us the way. The example is right there in today’s Gospel. Somehow, Jesus’ apostles – his highly imperfect trainees – allowed His power to work through them and feed 5,000 people with a few loaves and fishes. We can make the difficult possible. We can do more, in God’s name, than we could ever do on our own. In Christ, and with Christ, the possibilities are beyond the limits of our imagination.

I want you to think about that. Really ponder it in this coming week. We've heard today's Gospel reading so many times, it's all too easy for us to take its vital message for granted.

Don't rely on my Little League story: Your own lives are full of such examples, if you look for them.

As we move toward a new year in Christian Formation, in Stewardship, in the development of a thriving Newcomers' program, let us remember to offer the resources we have to Christ, so that we can make his miracles known in the world.