Sunday, August 4, 1985
HOW CAN I HELP?
John 6:1-15

"How can I help?" or "If there's any way that I can be of help, please call me." Most of us have made this kind of offer of help to friends or neighbors when we know they are facing a crisis. And we've also been the recipients of help from others, often times without asking for it. There are many times when helping simply happens in the ordinary course of events. It's not something we think about, but merely the instinctive response of a caring person.

It's almost like a reflex. Someone slips, your arms go out. A car is stuck in the snow, you join others and push. A flood or tornado hits a town, and people help each other. Someone at work is feeling depressed, and you try to cheer her up. It all seems natural and appropriate.

I'm always amazed how quickly a neighborhood or church circle comes to help when a death occurs. Food is brought to the home or church, offers to be of help pour in. People seem to sense what's needed, or if we don't, and feel momentarily awkward, someone comes quickly with an idea and it's just right, and we're grateful.

A sense of well-being and pleasure comes from helping others. On the one hand, the effort was so natural it might seem pointless or self-conscious to make something of it. Yet if we stop to consider why it all felt so good, we sense that some deeper process was at work. Expressing our innate generosity, we experience and act out our kinship, our connectedness. When we help someone, we are being true to our basic inner nature. We are being what we were meant to be.

And yet there are other times when we hold back our help. We don't even ask, "How can I help?" Although at times helping may simply happen in the ordinary course of events, all too often helping isn't happening at all. Or if it is, it is anything but natural. It is self-conscious, half-hearted, complaining. We can find within each of us the conflict between generosity and holding back, between self-sacrifice and self-protectiveness.

As someone said to me: "Sometimes I help, sometimes I don't. I hold the door open for one behind me, or I rush through preoccupied in thought. I vote, but not always. When solicitations come through the mail, some catch my eye or heart and I send at least something. Others I basket as junk mail. A friend is having a hard time. I think I should phone to see how she is, but I just don't feel like it tonight."

Usually, those closest to us get an immediate hearing. The suffering of people more remote gets sporadic attention. We're only vaguely aware of it. It's out there somewhere. And sometimes it seems there are so many demands for our help, and we think, "Who should I help anyway? Senior citizens, battered children, human rights victims, whales?" If we don't defuse the nuclear threat, there'll be no tomorrow, but if we don't support education and the arts, what kind of tomorrow will it be? This matter of "How can I help?" can be complicated and confusing.

The story this morning from the Bible, which was read just a few minutes ago from the Gospel of John, is about helping and not helping. A large crowd of people had been following Jesus in order to listen to his teachings. It was getting near the end of the day and Jesus knew the people would be hungry, and that many had no food. So he said to one of his disciples, "How

are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?" "Do you have any suggestions for feeding all these people?"

Note that when Jesus asked for help in feeding the people, there were two different kinds of responses. One response was: "It's too big a problem. It can't be done." That's what one disciple said. Another one said: "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?"

Although it was a different kind of situation, the disciples must've felt like we often feel today in the face of seemingly insurmountable problems. We look at the world, we listen to the news and see a steady stream of images of misery on a suffering planet: homeless ones huddled by a doorway, old ones looking vacant in a nursing home, slain revolutionaries, a drunk driver just realizing he's killed his whole family or someone else's family, starving children with bloated bellies and haunted eyes, victims of natural disasters, helpless leaders, helpless helpers. And we wonder, in the face of such need, what can we do to help? And then we tell ourselves: "I've got my own life to live." "What are five barley loaves and two fish among so many?" And so we hold back our help. We have so little to offer that there's no use in even mentioning it. It won't be missed anyway.

The second response to Jesus' request for help came not from his disciples, but from a young boy who shyly offered his lunch to one of the disciples, so that it would be given to Jesus.

Maybe this lad overheard the discussion between Jesus and his disciples. But he didn't stop to think about whether it was enough or not. He wanted to help. He wanted to do something. This is the kind of faith, the kind of help, that miracles are made of. He gave what he had. He did what he could.

We can imagine that he had begged his mother for permission to make a day of it; and that she had no doubt told him that he was too young to understand what Jesus would be talking about. But he had kept pestering her, and in the end, she had given him his way; and making up a little bundle of food, enough to see a boy through the day, had let him go. Perhaps, standing as near to Jesus as he could, he had overheard Christ's question and the subsequent dilemma, and he had generously offered his little bundle of food to one of the disciples.

Can you imagine the story he had to tell his parents that night when he got home, with his eyes shining and his cheeks on fire — of the miracle that he and Jesus had performed. He understood the message of Jesus better than anyone.

What then does this story tell us about our helping?

The first point I've already emphasized, but it bears repeating again and again. Do not hold back your help because you are afraid it won't be enough. It is always better to light one candle than simply to curse the darkness. If you can't do everything, at least do what you can. This story from the Bible tells us that when we do what we can to help; when we give what we have, as did the little boy in the story, God takes our little bit and makes it into something we hadn't imagined. This happens today over and over again in the many ministries of the church.

Years ago in Philadelphia, a little girl came to Sunday School and asked to be taken into one of the classes. The classes were full and the church was so small that there seemed to be no place for her. Her desire to find a place in that Sunday School fired her with zeal to see the church made larger, to provide room for more children like herself. Without speaking to

anyone, she began to save pennies to help build that bigger church. Not too long after, the little girl died, but under her pillow was found an old red pocketbook in which were 57 pennies and a scrap of paper on which was written the reason why she was saving her pennies.

The minister who conducted the funeral told the story of those 57 pennies, and it got into the newspapers. What could a little girl's 57 pennies do? Well, they did a lot. The tide of gifts which her example inspired flowed with increasing strength and in six years the 57 pennies had become $250,000, which became the nucleus of yet grander things, for the Baptist Temple with its Good Samaritan Hospital and the great Temple University with its thousands of students have come into being as the marvelous harvest of that little girl's devotion. The miracle of the five loaves and two fish because a little boy wanted to do what he could, happens over and over again. "How can I help?" Even though you can't do everything, you can at least do what you can.

Remember, our Christian faith tells us that in those moments when we question whether we've anything useful for others, when we wonder what do we really have to offer, what do we really have to give? Remember this, in addition to whatever material things you have to give, Jesus tells us we have everything to give — everything. Within each one of us is that essence of being, which is in all things, that which we call God. When we give to others, when we help others in any way, we also remind them that God is in them too, and we reaffirm the fact that we are connected one to another — that's why miracles happen in our helping.

Secondly, this means that we are to be of help in whatever way we can just because it's the right thing to do. It calls forth the highest that is in us. I say that because I know people who now hold back their help because sometime past, they gave help and they are sure it wasn't appreciated or they weren't properly thanked. If you give help only because you want appreciation in return, or because you want to be noticed by others and given proper recognition — you're doing it for the wrong reason.

There are times when our help will not be appreciated. There are times when our helping will be misunderstood. There are times when our offer to help will be refused and we will be hurt by the refusal. There are times when people will benefit from our help and not even know it until later. There are times when we will be helping people and they will not know where the help came from.

In fact, Jesus tells us that our giving of help should be so anonymous, so unknown that our left hand should not know what our right hand is doing. Lloyd Douglas's novel of many years ago entitled "The Magnificent Obsession" is about a man who goes about giving help and aid secretly.

The little boy in this morning's story from the Gospel of John did not give his lunch to Jesus because he wanted to receive credit or praise. He gave it simply because he wanted to be of help. He wanted to do what he could. His name was not even recorded in the Bible. He received no thank-you notes in the mail and he didn't expect any. Most of the people who ate that day had no idea where the food came from or who started the miracle.

Remember too, there are times when our helping for the best of reasons may even make people suspicious of our motives. Bishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil said: "I brought food to the hungry and people called me a saint. I asked why people were hungry and the people called me a communist."

Thirdly, sometimes your help and mine will seem to be wasted, and this can make us unwilling to be of help again. There are times, too, when we cannot see anything positive come from our help in the short run, but in the long run, it may prove more beneficial than we had ever imagined. The fact is that some seeds we plant will not grow, but that should not keep us from continuing to plant. It's nice to be totally successful in our helping, but that is not the primary motivation for being of help in the first place. The little boy who offered his lunch was not thinking of failure or success — he simply wanted to do what he could.
If we accept the fact that the ends of our actions often prove unknowable, we're also freer to focus on the process of our work as it's happening. We can trust God and God assures us that if we are faithful in our helping, miracles will happen and in ways we hadn't even considered.

How can I help? We do what we can. Yet we cannot really presume to know the final meaning of our actions. We give it all we have and trust the rest to God. Amen.