

Don't Set Limits

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Feeding the Five Thousand

Now when Jesus heard (about the death of John the Baptist), he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The Story of the Feeding of the 5000 is one of the best-known Sunday school stories. But it's weird. What do we do with this fun, but kind of hard to believe story? Can it be Living Word for us?

This story is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Clearly, each of the gospel writers considered it to be key. Indeed, we could mine this passage for many nuggets. The only other time I preached this in my ministry I had six points in my sermon. Today we'll just consider three. I owe

you a short sermon after last week.

First of all, the setting. Have you ever *needed* a vacation? I mean really, REALLY needed a vacation? Of course you have. Look at this situation for Jesus here. This story immediately follows the death of John the Baptist. In response, Jesus tries to take a little retreat time to grieve. For John was Jesus' cousin and childhood playmate (according to Luke's gospel). As adults they are both working prominently for the kin-dom of God. But now King Herod has murdered John. Can Jesus' own execution be far behind? Jesus *desperately* needed to get away.

In the gospels we do see Jesus frequently, and successfully, taking time away, to get free from the crowds, to pray, to rest and recharge. In this instance he takes a boat across the lake, but the crowds race around on shore and are there when he arrives. He is hungry for rest. They are hungry for healing and for his words of life. Jesus, according to Matthew, despite his exhaustion and psychic fragility, "had compassion on them" and cured their sick all through the day. Compassion is the central characteristic of Jesus and is the magnet that drew the crowds to him. Compassion.

What about the disciples? Were they compassionate toward the crowd? One commentator observed that, in his opinion, the disciples acted like the Secret Service. They weren't concerned with the *needs* of the crowd; they were concerned about crowd *control*. That seems to me kind of harsh. I think they probably were concerned about the people. That's why they wanted them to go and buy something to eat in the neighboring towns. I think the disciples just didn't understand the possibilities right where they were.

Jesus says, "The people don't need to go away. *You* give them something to eat." Matthew's account of the disciples' response is very succinct. A simple "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." Really? We can imagine that there

was more to it than that. Wouldn't you have loved to have been there to see it? Jesus says, "The people don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." I can imagine the disciples looking around at the crowd, perhaps 15,000 people total. They look at their provisions: five loaves, two fish. Eyebrows raise, they glance at each other, eyes roll, heads shake. They look back at Jesus. Riiiiggghhht.

As I said, the disciples didn't understand the possibilities right where they were. Ed Bowen writes, "One day when I was going into the hospital there was a mother and her little girl walking just ahead of me. But just before they got to the entrance, the little girl stopped and asked, "How are we going to get inside? There are no handles on those doors." But the mother just smiled, and walked forward. The electronic eye opened the door automatically, and they walked in.

He wondered if we don't spend too much of our time just standing in front of those closed doors. We stand there, thinking how impossible it is for us to get through. But in cases like that," we have to remember the old camp song, "When the Spirit says 'Move,"ya gotta move. Uggh. Uggh." Don't look at our meager resources. Look to the one who gave the order. So, point one is constant compassion. Point two is "Don't stand there and think about it. Let us just go forward, and trust God to open the doors and do what is needed." (*Lectionary Homiletics*, August, 1999, p. 7)

Many of us can quote the verse from Psalm 119 (vs. 105) "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." In Bible times, a lantern only gave off light for a few feet ahead. One couldn't see the entire path. It's only as we start down the path more and more light is revealed to us when we need it.

My spouse Kris is going back to the pipeline protest in North Dakota in three weeks and this time I'm going to accompany her. Will we accomplish anything? Will we be arrested or injured? Don't know. But we are simply moving forward in

faith, trying to be obedient to the light we already have.

Okay, third, let's not avoid it any longer; let's look at the math. Jesus takes these meager resources, thanks God for them, then he gives the food to the disciples, they give it to the crowd and all 15,000 people are fed, with twelve baskets left over. I remember hearing a sermon explaining that this was not a miracle of multiplication. The preacher contended that it was simply that people saw the example of the disciples and started to share. And people choosing to share can, indeed, sometimes feel like a miracle. The preacher suggested that many of the people actually had brought food with them and had it stuffed up the sleeves of their robes or hidden away in their belongings, but no one was willing to take their food out and start eating. Why? Because of the strong hospitality ethic in that culture, which required one to share one's food with whomever is nearby. Well, if 15,000 hungry people are nearby, we can understand the reluctance to pull out your sandwich.

Is that what happened? Everybody chipping in, sort of a "stone soup" phenomenon? Maybe. I'm not crazy about that explanation. I don't know what happened. Certainly, Jesus, in his openness to the Spirit of God had, in many other instances, tapped into divine power. The divine power that created this whole fertile green globe could certainly produce an abundance of bread, in a time of need.

It's a mystery. Maybe that's a cop-out. It's the best I can do. As I often say, "There's room for mystery in my faith."

At any rate, there is an abundance of need, and there is an abundance of bread. Bread and food are so important throughout scripture, from Creation of plants and animals, to

Abram sharing a meal with the visitors who will announce Sarai's pregnancy at age 90, to Jacob bringing his father Isaac a meal before he receives his father's blessing, to the miracle of manna

in the wilderness, to David eating the bread of the priests, to Jesus' parables about yeast in the dough...That's enough examples. That word "bread" is found how many times in the Bible? More than 300!

And Amy-Jill Levine notes that in the gospel of Luke as soon as Jesus is born, he is wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid where...? In a manger. The bread of life in a feedbox. The sharing of food is so central to our life of faith. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "When you are with Jesus you are inescapably in the bread business. You need bread to share because it is the work of Jesus to feed hungry people and express compassion concretely." (*Collected Sermons*, p.236).

That's why you Oak Grovers contribute to and volunteer at VEAP, our local foodshelf, now the largest in the state of Minnesota. It's why you drive for meals on wheels. It's why you are doing the Sheridan Project, providing weekend food for kids in our neighborhood who otherwise would be hungry...and so on.

Anne Lamott, one of my very favorite authors, said somewhere that when she begins to feel deprived it's a sure sign that she needs to start giving, find some homeless mothers and hand out tens and twenties. "I know that giving is the way ... we fill ourselves up."

I remember long ago reading a story about refugee children immediately following World War II. These were orphans, used to being hungry, fearful, for as long as they could remember in their short lives. Now, finally, the war has ended. No more fighting, and enough to eat. But the children were still very fearful, and unable to sleep at night. Even though they were no longer hungry, they feared being hungry again. Then someone got the idea to give the children a piece of bread to hold in their hand as they went to sleep. And it worked. They slept like babies, like children should, peacefully, with the security of bread.

We had a similar experience with our daughter Anji, adopted from an orphanage in India at 17 months of age. If we gave her a cookie or a piece of candy she would not eat it. She'd hang on to it...until we gave her another. Only then would she eat the first.

Those who follow Jesus and who gather around the table for spiritual nourishment are to make sure that it is a Welcome Table for all, pledging ourselves to provide bread for the hungry, security for the frightened.

And there are a lot of frightened people these days. So there are churches in training now to once again become sanctuary churches, to protect immigrants from unjust deportation. I know you well. I know that in these scary times the Oak Grove family will bring whatever we have—our symbolic five loaves and two fish—and we will, in faithfulness to Jesus' call, provide bread for the hungry and if necessary, sanctuary for the frightened.

Amen? Amen!