

St. Paul's Congregational Church, August 6, 2017  
 Proper 13A; Matthew 14:13-21; Isaiah 55:1-5;  
 "More than Enough"  
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Let's imagine for a few minutes – put ourselves as those disciples traveling with Jesus. At the end of a long day we are standing with him, in front of huge crowds hungering for his words, his presence, his compassion. Those crowds who have watched him heal the sick; they've listened to his words, desperate to be close to him and now, we ask Jesus to send them away to buy food – but what we hear from Jesus is startling – don't send them away – you give them something to eat! We look at each other and think, even say, we can't do that, that's not enough – all we have are two loaves and 5 fish.

Jesus surprises us again – tells us to bring the food to him – and he tells the crowd to sit down right where they are. He takes the loaves and the fish, blesses them, and gives them to us to feed the crowd. There must have been 5000 people there – plus the women and children, not ordinarily included in the count of any gathering. But everyone ate all they wanted and needed – there were even leftovers.

We look at each other – surprised but a little embarrassed, perhaps – feeling like we should have expected a miracle like this – Jesus does things like this all the time. When will we learn that for this Jesus we follow nothing is impossible? When will we learn that when we follow Jesus nothing is impossible for us either! When will we learn that we are empowered to make miracles too?

Jesus tells his disciples there on that hill, Jesus tells us, here in this place, you give them something to eat!

Let's look at the context of our reading today: Jesus has withdrawn to a place where hopefully he can pray and meditate – his cousin, John the Baptist, has been brutally executed by Herod. It's at Herod's birthday party, lavish, tables loaded with food and drink, where Herod is so pleased with a dancer that he promises her anything she wants. She asks for and gets, the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Jesus hears this news and naturally wants time away – a family member has just been murdered! He needs a time to mourn, for renewal, he's hungry for the refreshment of time alone with God. Hunger is not just about our stomachs, is it.

But instead of calm and quiet there is a noisy crowd. Instead of the needed refreshment, there is a rush of needful people. They are hungry, starving, for hope and help and Jesus responds, reaches out – with a heart of compassion. And when they become hungry for physical food later in the day, Jesus reaches out again with the abundance of God.

Such a contrast in the two events – Herod's birthday bash and the crowds assembled in the field.

There on the field Jesus is shaping his sometimes reluctant disciples into a compassionate group who that will carry the ministry and his message to a hungry world. Jesus responds with the words that I hope will become implanted into our souls today:

YOU give them something to eat. Because in this story Jesus is also shaping us, encouraging us, challenging us, into joining that same compassionate group who will continue to carry his ministry and message into this still-so-hungry world.

The disciples didn't have a clue as to how to feed this hungry crowd. They thought what they had to offer was too little – just like we often feel – but the rest of the story shows us how God can use what we have available to continue to offer compassion and help and hope to a hungry world.

Compassion – it's one of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry. Every encounter Jesus has with hurting people is full of his compassionate touch. It's this compassion that draws the hurting crowds – it's compassion that draws people to a church – there's an old saying, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." So true, isn't it.

One of the central ideas in our gospel lesson today is that God can and will take our not enough and turn it into more than enough. Amazing things can happen when we see with eyes of compassion and make ourselves available to God as agents of compassion. Will we have eyes to see? How will we respond?

Our world is full of heartbreaking news – famine around the world, cities burned by war, pictures of men, women, and children wounded and dying every day on the news, refugees living in terrible conditions, hungry, thirsty, afraid. I'm haunted by the suicide of a twelve year old girl after being bullied to a point where she just couldn't take it any more. An opioid epidemic that's taking so many lives every day – it's too close to home!

And we, like those early disciples, can be reluctant, feel overwhelmed, get tired. What can I, we do, in light of such desperate need. In terms of our gospel lesson, we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish – and that's just not enough.

But it is enough! It's more than enough! You give them something to eat – food for the soul, nourishment for the heart - bring all you can – presence – caring. As we stand together to feed our neighbors – God will provide a way. And God will never let us down. Never. Isn't that good news!

This all starts with compassion. As we become agents of God's compassion, as we become brave enough to risk, to not count only on our reason but to also trust our faith, to trust our God – wonderful things can and will happen. Miracles do happen. People are fed. People find hope. People are filled. And there's enough left over to reach out more and more.

I can't help but make a connection between this story and our own story here at St. Paul's – we are Jesus' disciples looking over the crowd – hungry for food, yes, but hungry to hear Jesus' words of hope, of nourishment, hungry to know and feel Jesus' compassion. And Jesus is telling us, you give them something to eat. And Jesus is telling us, you have enough – you have more than enough.

Well, we don't have a lot of money here at St. Paul's do we – but we have space – and thanks to your support, we'll share that space with hungry people in our town. It's an extraordinary opportunity for us to extend hope and compassion to our neighbors, isn't it. Yes, there's some cost to it – and there's always a bit of anxiety attached to it - we're cleaning out rooms to house the food – we're letting go of symbols, stuff, of the past to make room for the new - we're using, sharing, some of our space in new and different ways – we'll be welcoming members of the community into our space in new and

different ways – from volunteers offering compassion to our neighbors – to those who will benefit from that compassion. God is calling us out of our past, out of our “stuckness” into a future – God is calling us to extend our hospitality, our compassion – and we have more than enough to do just that – Jesus tells us, “You give them something to eat.” We can do this. With God’s help, we can do anything.

What more opportunities are around the corner just waiting for us to see and respond to? What is the Still Speaking God saying to you? It’s an exciting time in the life of St. Paul’s – a community called by God over 100 years ago to glorify God in worship, teaching, and service. We have enough – we have more than enough. Praise God for that.

And we can’t help but also make a connection between this story and the celebration of Communion. Jesus gave the prayer and the blessing – the act of breaking the bread, the distribution through the disciples to the crowds: today we too come to the table to be fed – today we come to the table to be restored – today we come to the table to be strengthened, energized, empowered, recommitted to following Jesus, perhaps to places we’d rather not go. But know that God is with us – that what we have is enough – that what we share will be multiplied further than we can imagine.

A friend of mine wrote this devotional – this testimony - for the Connecticut Conference: “While in Baltimore for General Synod 2017, I had several encounters with people experiencing homelessness. More than a handful approached me asking for money. One ran up to me while I ate dinner in an outdoor restaurant and asked me for food. I even watched painfully as a young, sunburned, teenage girl spent over an hour in the hot sun routinely walking through lines of stopped cars with her cardboard sign, returning empty-handed to the lamp post at the corner, and waiting for the light to turn red again.

As I watched this young person from a restaurant with a \$20 plate of food in front of me, I felt a mix of guilt, shame, and helplessness.

There are approximately half a million people experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States. More than 42 million people suffer from hunger throughout the nation. In the world, that number approaches 800 million. Whenever I hear these statistics, I wonder how this is possible, especially in a nation as prosperous as ours.

I also wonder where the miracle is now. Almost a billion people are in need – not a mere five thousand.

Then I remember that Jesus didn’t feed five thousand; Jesus didn’t feed anyone that day. The story tells us that Jesus told the disciples “give them something to eat.” When they said they did not have enough, Jesus took the food they had and blessed it, making enough for all. Or did he?

So perhaps the blessing wasn’t on the food, transforming it into a magical Loaf of Feeding to satisfy all. Perhaps the blessing was on the disciples, so that they might have the means to go and feed those who needed it, transforming ordinary people into the working hands of God, to show God’s love for all and capacity to provide all that is needed. In my mind, this is no less a miracle than the Loaf of Feeding interpretation.

In our times, when economic divides are widening and social assistance programs are under funded and targeted by those who wish to preserve their own wealth and security, it feels like we need a miracle. But the blessing, the miracle, has already

been given. We are the disciples. We have been blessed, and subsequently charged with caring for those in need. The miracle didn't end with 12 baskets of leftovers; it continues through us whenever we care for and provide for our neighbors.

Sometime this week, or maybe even today, you will see a person or be in a situation where compassion is needed. If you are open to it, you will know deep in your heart and soul that God calls you to be an agent of compassion, that God trusts you, has faith in you, that God will empower you to serve. And you'll begin to wonder what can be done for or with this person, this situation, and these words will come to you: YOU give them something to eat. And you will. You will find those hidden possibilities as you open yourselves to God's creativity and wonder. You will do it because you can't NOT do it – because God is with you – and nothing is impossible with God. God will take your, my, our “not enough” and turn it into more than enough.

So may it be for each of us. Amen.