

Proper 13A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus withdrew 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. (NRSV)

Jesus withdraws in a boat to "a deserted place by himself." But before he even gets **to** this deserted place, crowds of people from the towns hear about where he is going, and they travel to that place on foot, arriving there even before Jesus gets out of his boat.

Why do they go to such effort to seek Jesus out? I think it is because they have a longing, an emptiness within them which they *know* Jesus can fill - a *spiritual* longing, a yearning for God, an aching for acceptance and love and wholeness. We are told that, upon seeing the crowds, Jesus has compassion on them; he heals the sick, restoring them to wholeness of being.

But as the day comes to a close, Jesus' disciples go to him and say, "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."

Now, I wonder: Why didn't **Jesus** think about feeding the crowds? Why didn't *he* see that the sun was going down, the marketplaces in the villages would be closing, and these crowds of people hadn't brought supper with them? What is it about the *disciples'* way of seeing the world that makes **them** so sensitive to the lack of food?

In pondering that question, I tried to put myself in the disciples' place, imagining what *I* would be thinking and feeling if I were one of them. And upon looking into myself, I found a deep-seated, generalized, persistent undercurrent of anxiety that *there may not be enough* – not just not enough food, as is the case in our Gospel story, but not enough of *whatever* it is I need, or *will* need in the future. There is within me an ingrained scarcity mindset. The way I tend to *respond* to this scarcity mindset is to seek **more**; and the place where I *look* for that "more" is out there, in the world.

And I think that I am not alone in having this mindset. I think that the deep-seated, unconscious undercurrent of anxiety that *there is not enough* is shared by many, if not most. Is this not what we saw manifested a few months ago when we first felt the threat of COVID-19? The fear that we wouldn't have enough toilet paper or hand sanitizer caused us to empty the shelves at Walmart and the grocery stores and even Amazon in order to stockpile our cupboards with these hoarded goods – leaving nothing for others to buy. But was it really the fear of not enough *toilet paper* that caused our panic buying? Or was buying toilet paper simply a tangible and concrete way to assuage our more generalized, unconscious anxiety that there may not be enough of *whatever* is necessary for my survival and wellbeing? And **our** solution to that pervasive, unconscious fear of “not-enoughness” is the same solution that the *disciples* turn to in today's Gospel, the same solution that *anyone* living within a marketplace economy naturally turns to first: to go out and buy.

But Jesus does not see life this way. In fact, when Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the Temple in John's Gospel, he said to those who were selling doves, “Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!” (John 2:16, NRSV) Because **God's** economy is *not* a marketplace economy, wherein “I give you *this* and you give me *that*.” **God's** economy is an economy of grace, mercy, and love, which cannot be bought or earned or deserved: it is given.

And from this perspective of **God's** economy, Jesus tells his disciples, “**You** give them something to eat.” But their response, again coming from their mindset in a marketplace economy, is to protest that there is *not enough*. They say, “We have **nothing** here but – five loaves and two fish.” We have nothing but...

John Shea, commenting on today's text, points out that five plus two equals seven, and in the Bible, seven is a sacred number.¹ And so, the fact that the disciples have seven items of food is a sign that what they have is a gift from God. Dr. Shea says that the disciples have “two choices: [they can] look at the food [they have] as God's gift or look at it as not enough. How you see it will determine what is possible.”²

How you see it will determine what is possible.

Jesus, as we have already noted, sees from the perspective of the economy of God, wherein *everything* is gift. He tells the disciples to bring the five loaves and two fish to him, and he orders the crowds to sit down on the grass. He takes the loaves and fish and, looking up to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples, who in turn give them to the crowds.

John Shea remarks, “Jesus sees *whatever* they have as God's gift. When this *spiritual* consciousness emerges, the desert becomes a garden. People sit down on green grass. Jesus takes the available food and recognizes it as God's gift by

looking to heaven, ... and he praises and thanks God. Gratitude for what is given fills Jesus completely, fills him to overflowing. With this abundance of Spirit he breaks the too few loaves and gives them to the disciples. He has freely received and now he freely gives. [And the] disciples have learned from their teacher. What *they* have received from him, *they* give to the crowds.”³

In other words, the disciples’ way of seeing has been changed as they are swept up in the strong flow of gratitude and abundance pouring forth from Jesus. No longer do they see through the eyes of “not-enough-ness;” they now see the reality which Jesus sees, that everything is a gift from God. In the Kingdom of God, in the realm of the Spirit, there **is** no scarcity; only abundance.

How does this transformation of mindset come about? John Shea notes a threefold process (a process which could also work with you or me). First, Jesus directs the focus of his disciples’ attention away from seeing what they *lack* toward seeing what they *have*. This includes looking inside themselves and recognizing that they have a spiritual nature which has been too long neglected, which harbors their very soul. Secondly, Jesus gives thanks to God for what they **do** have. Becoming grateful for what we have is a necessary step. And finally, Jesus *gives away* the gift to others, who in turn give it to others. “No one takes and holds; everyone receives and gives. The result is participation in divine abundance, an experience that is completely satisfying [they all eat their fill] for it is the fulfillment of the created potential of people.”⁴ We were created in the image and likeness of God, and so, participation in spiritual abundance is the fulfillment of our created potential.

In America we seem to use the state of our marketplace economy as a measure of our well-being as a nation. As one presidential campaign strategist famously said, “It’s the economy, stupid!” If the stock market and the GDP are doing well, the reasoning goes, then all is well with the nation!

But what about our *moral* condition, as a society? Our relational condition with one another and those of other nations? Are these not measures of our well-being as a nation? Do we follow Jesus and have compassion on the crowds, love our neighbors *and* our enemies, see the citizens of the world, *all* of them, as God’s children and our sisters and brothers? Might this not be how God, whose economy is grace, love, and mercy, judges our well-being as a nation? Do we, not only as *individuals* but as a nation, thank God for what we have received, and turn around and give it to others? Do we allow the divine Spirit, God’s abundance to flow through us freely? Or do we receive what God has given us and hold onto it?

Presbyterian minister Fred Rogers saw with kingdom eyes. In the early days of television, he perceived how this new visual medium could reach the hearts and minds of children, and he created a virtual “neighborhood” where every child could feel safe and valued and loved. Mr. Rogers was a genius in this burgeoning

new world of visual media. But in his office, he had framed his favorite quotation, a quote from *The Little Prince*, and it said, simply, “The essential is invisible to the eyes.” The visual world of Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood was created as a medium through which could be expressed what was really essential: the abundant, overflowing acceptance love which poured through the open spirit of Fred Rogers into the hearts and minds of countless children.⁵ It is as if Jesus himself had said to Mr. Rogers, “**You** give them something to sustain them” – not food for children’s *bellies*, but food for their souls: the abundant and never-ending love of God. The essential that is invisible to the eyes.

And in the end, is that not what Jesus truly gave to his disciples and the crowds that day in that deserted place? God’s abundant and never-ending love, grace, and mercy, delivered through the outward form of five loaves and two fishes, and multiplied beyond their imagining?

AMEN

1 <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/what-is-the-biblical-significance-of-the-number-7.html>

2 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 242

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 244

5 “The real Mr. Rogers?” *The Christian Century*, July 29, 2020, p. 13