

8-2-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 14: 13-31 You Want Us to Do What?

One of the things I am missing during this pandemic is the ability to safely share meals together. Don't we all miss our weekly fellowship times over the table after worship? And the potlucks at Share the Adventure? There always seems to be enough food at church potlucks no matter how many or how few of us. The only potluck I've ever been to that didn't have enough was a church potluck where everyone but one family brought dessert! That was one sweet time of fellowship!

Today's story of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew contrasts two meals- one gruesome and the other miraculous. Today's story began, "When Jesus heard what happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." Because of something Jesus heard, he left where he was healing and teaching the people and went to a private place for some serious prayer. So what happened right before this story that drove him to alone time with God?

Jesus had gotten word of the death of John the Baptist, the man who had baptized him, had prepared the way for Jesus' ministry, and declared Jesus the One who would save his people from their sins. King Herod had thrown John in prison because John had called out Herod's divorce from his own wife in order to take his brother's wife and marry her. On his birthday, Herod threw a big dinner party with lavish food, and the best wine for his guests. For dinner entertainment his daughter had danced seductively before those well-fed, half-drunken dinner guests. She must have been a really, really good dancer because Herod offered her anything she wanted. What did she want? John the Baptist's head, sliced off, and sitting all bloody on a dinner platter. And that is what happened. Gruesome. John's death reminded Jesus of the cost of staying on the path his heavenly Father had him on. How do you keep doing what God wants when it can cause trouble, land you in jail and even cost you your life? A modern-day John, Rep. John Lewis, knew what that meant. He was told all his life growing up, "Now don't get into trouble, John," but when he joined the civil rights movement with MLK, he decided that getting into what he called "good trouble" was necessary if he was to stay true to his calling from God. And he was jailed over and over, and beaten almost to death for standing up for the right to vote for black Americans. It took courage for both Johns and for Jesus, so Jesus withdrew to a solitary place to pray for strength and clarity of focus.

But someone discovered his secret praying place and the people came from the villages to be healed. Anyone but Jesus would have sent them away so they

could keep praying. But Jesus had compassion and there in the wilderness he began to heal the sick and disabled. And people just kept coming all day.

As evening came, the disciples arrived to check on Jesus. After all, they hadn't seen him since he left to pray. And they saw the huge crowd of people and told Jesus to send them away to get dinner. Children and babies were hungry and crying, and it was a deserted place. The disciples didn't mean any harm sending them away; they were just being practical. But Jesus told them, "You give them something to eat."

I imagine those 12 disciples looking at each other and saying to themselves, "You want us to do what?" After all, what could **they** do? When they checked their small 2-gallon woven baskets people carried their lunch in, all they found were 5 loaves of bread and two fish to feed a crowd of 5000 men plus women and children. There was only one choice: send the crowd to try and find their own food.

The disciples operated with a lens of scarcity- they looked at the small meal and all they saw was not enough. Jesus operated with a lens of plenty- they had plenty of time, and plenty of possibilities with what they had. After all, wherever there is plenty of God, there will be plenty of everything else. Like the hymn we sang closing our time of prayer, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and all the rest will be added to you.*" When we look at life through a lens of scarcity, we seldom see enough and may even hoard what we have rather than sharing. Isn't that what happened with toilet paper and cleaning supplies at the beginning of the pandemic? People who feared there wouldn't be enough bought up all there was and the rest of us were sent away to find our own. Looking at life through a lens of scarcity encourages churches to send people away too- Oh, they don't actually say, "Go somewhere else," they just give off signals that it's OK to be here, but don't ask for anything different, they're not open to changes that would be meaningful to new people. People get the message and don't come back. Scarcity-driven churches end up starving people instead of feeding them.

But Jesus knew there was enough. He lifted that small meal up to the sky and gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples to give to the people. And somewhere between the time Jesus broke the bread and began to place some of the food into each disciple's lunch basket, and the disciples began to hand it to the crowd, the food just kept appearing. The disciples saw the miracle happen every time they handed another piece of food to someone, but Matthew gives no indication that the crowd was aware. The crowd just knew there was food -

enough that they were satisfied and there were 12 baskets of leftovers. Even the disciples had plenty to eat. Because wherever there is plenty of God, there is plenty of everything else. And wherever Jesus is, there is plenty of God.

When Jesus calls us to do something, what lens are we looking through? Scarcity or plenty? Do we see only our small resources or do we see the power of God to turn the impossible into the possible? It was something the disciples struggled to see and we still struggle to see today. Paul understood the struggle when he wrote in his letter to the church in Ephesus: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”¹ God is in the business of doing more than we imagine to pray for if we have eyes to see and hearts to believe. It’s usually said that there were 12 baskets full of leftovers to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. But what if it was more personal than that? What if those 12 baskets were a message to those 12 disciples as each one looked at his own basket full of leftovers- that when they do what Jesus calls them to do, trusting Jesus to do his part, there is no need to send people away because there will be enough for themselves too?

Jesus did most of his miracles himself while his disciples watched. Jesus was the one who touched the lepers and healed the blind and the lame. And everyone marveled at Jesus’ power. “Who is this man?” they asked. This time, Jesus’ disciples were involved in the miracle as they served the people. The power came from Jesus, but it happened as the disciples took their place as extensions of Jesus’ hands and feet. Hungry people were miraculously fed as the disciples served. What is God calling us to do with our small resources? Not on our own strength, but as extensions of Jesus’ hands and feet?

How long has it been since we trusted God’s call to do something impossible instead of lowering our expectations down to what’s practical? How often do we send people away to find their spiritual food somewhere else today? How long since we prayed that God would send us an impossible opportunity? Something that would take more than all the practicality, skills, organizational ability, team work, creativity and imagination we can muster? Something that will only happen because we trust God’s power through us and we go for it? There’s a world of people out there hungry to experience God’s power- will they experience it through us?

¹ Ephesians 3: 20a