

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 3, 2014

"God Will Provide."

Matthew 14:13-21

There is a time-honored story about a pastor and his wife who decided to invite the church council and their spouses for dinner. It was quite an undertaking, but this devoted couple want to be a good example for the leaders of their church.

When it came time for dinner, everyone was seated and the pastor's wife asked their little four-year-old girl if she would say grace. The girl said, "I don't know what to say." Her mother replied, "Honey, just say what I say." Everyone bowed their heads and the little girl prayed, "Dear Lord, why did I have all these people over for dinner? Amen!"

That must be how Jesus felt when he looked out on those 5,000+ people who came to hear him teach. We call this story the feeding of the five thousand, but that's misleading. Matthew tells us it was five thousand men plus women and children. If each of the men had a wife, and just one or two children the numbers could have been more like 10,000...or even more. "Dear Lord, why am I having all these people for dinner?"

This is one of the best known stories about Jesus. All four Gospel writers include it in their narrative of Jesus' life. The story comes at an interesting time. Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, the man who baptized Jesus and who commanded Jesus' love and respect, had just been killed by King Herod. When Jesus heard what happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place, probably to reflect on what happened to John, perhaps even to spend some time grieving. Jesus understood grief. He understood what it was like to lose someone you love. Remember that the next time you lose somebody close to you.

He wanted some time apart, but the crowd wouldn't leave him alone. They followed him on foot. When Jesus saw this mob of people following him, he had compassion on them, Matthew tells us, and healed their sick. This was the kind of man he was. His primary task was to train his disciples and to proclaim the kingdom of God, but he had enormous compassion for people's needs. So, when people came to him for healing or for guidance, he couldn't help but respond.

Evening was approaching, however. The disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." "That is not necessary," Jesus replied, "we can supply them with food." Well, you can imagine the disciples' surprise when he said that. "That's absurd," they probably thought, "all we have are five loaves of bread and two tiny fish--that's not even enough for us, Send them away, Master, before we have a real problem on our hands."

But five loaves and two fish are plenty in the Master's hands. "Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. And an amazing thing happened. There was plenty to go around, and when they were finished distributing the food, twelve baskets full were left over.

It's a great story. Christ fed nearly 10,000 people out in the wilderness without a catering service...no carry out...not pizza delivery service in sight. It is a remarkable story and it is a story that is important for our time.

First of all, this is a reminder of Christ's compassion... One of the most impressive things about Jesus was his compassion. Throughout the Gospels he calls to tired and hungry hearts, and says, "Come...and I will give you rest." To parents of small children, he says, "Bring them to me." He says the same thing concerning those who are afflicted: "Bring them to me." Bring blind Bartimaeus," he says. Bring the leper, the physically challenged, the person struggling with demons of emotional distress. On one occasion his invitation was so compelling that four friends lowered a paralyzed man through the roof of a house.

Jesus came with one purpose and desire...to seek and save the lost...to heal those who were hurting. At the beginning of his ministry he announced his mission, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free..." Luke 4:18. When he looked over Jerusalem, he

wept. He knew the heartaches, the headaches, and the hungers that go with being human. Jesus learned what it is to be human. He entered our world and experienced what we experience. So when we hurt, he understands; for he has been hurt too.

William Booth knew that when he took his Salvation Army out to the homeless people of his time. Wesley knew that when he began preaching in open fields to those to whom the established church had closed its doors. Mother Teresa knew that as she ministered to the least and the lost on the streets of Calcutta. Jesus had compassion for the crowd. And he still looks upon us with that same compassion today. What does that say to us today about our role as a church? The measure of our success as followers of Jesus will not be how full our pews or how high our steeple. The measure of success will be how willing we are to minister to the least and the lowest in our community.

Secondly, it's never a question about resources. It's a question of commitment. When Jesus instructed the disciples to feed the crowd of thousands, they only had five loaves and two tiny fish. And yet in Christ's hands, that was enough.

There have been many theories offered over the years about how Christ was able to feed all those thousands of people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. One of the most common explanations is found in a best-selling book of the 1940s titled *The Robe*. *The Robe* was written by Lloyd C. Douglas. In the 1950s it was made into a popular movie starring Richard Burton as a Roman tribune named Marcellus Gallio.

Marcellus, a fictional character, was among the soldiers who cast lots for Jesus' robe at the foot of the cross. His troubled mind is soothed when he but touches Jesus' robe. Later he finds favor with Emperor Tiberius and is commissioned to investigate, on behalf of the Emperor, the new emerging religion of "Christianity." This brings him into contact with many people Jesus knew. One of those people he came in contact with was present at the feeding of the 5,000. In this disciple's telling of what happened that day, it was not that there wasn't enough food. There was plenty of food. Most of the people who had followed after Jesus that day had thought to make provision for their pilgrimage. However, they kept their private bounties of fish and bread hidden.

It was not until a young boy stepped forward with his two fish and five small loaves that people started offering to others what they had brought as well. Everybody began to break out their food and, like any good church fellowship supper, after the multitude was fed, there were twelve baskets worth left over.

The same explanation was given by Bible scholar William Barclay who said, "The miracle was not the multiplication of the loaves and the fish; it was the transformation of selfish people into generous people at the touch of Christ...It was a miracle of the changed hearts in the men and women who were present. Christ banished the selfishness in their hearts."

Of course, we don't really know how Jesus fed the multitude, and it really doesn't matter. The miracle is that he did and he did it beginning with only five small loaves of bread and two tiny fish. It wasn't a question of resource, but of resolve. So it is in our situation. If we as a people were sincere in seeking to meet our community's needs, resources ultimately would not be a problem. Commitment is always the determining factor in God's work. If we are pursuing God's will, God will provide.

Finally, Christ provided what was needed and more besides. I've always been fascinated by the statement, "They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over." This is a statement of God's abundance. God always provides more than necessary to meet our needs. The disciples probably prayed, "Dear Lord, why did we have all these people over for dinner?" But Jesus looked over the crowd with compassion. When we act to meet the world's need, God will provide the resources.