

Matthew 14:13-21
August 6, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

For several weeks now Jesus has been teaching his disciples and the vast crowds that have been following. They are hungry for Jesus to see them. To feed them with this new teaching Jesus is proclaiming. To be healed by him. We have heard him speak in parables about how the smallest of seeds will grow into a magnificent and beautiful tree or about the planter spreading seed rather lavishly in good soil but also in places that wouldn't make prudent sense and would seem rather wasteful to modern day farmers and gardeners. Places full of weeds, thorns, rocks, and the like. But we are told, despite all this, an abundant and great harvest blossoms forth.

Then, we come to today's passage and Jesus seems to take his teaching and parables of what the kingdom will be like and put them into reality as he miraculously feeds the multitudes with such a minimal amount of food to begin with – 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. I can almost imagine the look on those disciples faces as Jesus looked at them and said, "They (the crowds) need not go away, you give them something to eat." The puzzled look in their eyes. The questions and thoughts that must have been floating around in their heads such

as, “Are you mad Jesus? With what shall we feed these huge crowds?” “This guy expects us to do what...” Jesus has placed great expectations upon these first followers. He has ordered them to teach, to go out into the villages where they may not be welcomed and even incur hostility and danger and also where they are to take nothing and be solely dependent upon Jesus and the hospitality of strangers to provide for their needs. And now this. Perhaps, this simply seems too big a task with so little. So many mouths to feed. They are but 12 disciples with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

These 12 have seen the needs of the crowd. They know they are hungry. They know the hour is getting late and a nearby village will have much more food to feed the crowd. They are doing what seems logical, secure and safe. Yet, Jesus has other plans that will reveal yet again the abundance of God’s kingdom that seeks to provide for the needs of all – men, women, and children. A feast spread out for the rich and the poor. Money does not entail one to a better meal than the poor person sitting nearby. No in this banquet hosted by the Great Shepherd all receive equally and all are nourished with exactly the same thing.

It is very rare for the 4 books we know as the Gospels to each have the identical story and the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle story to be found in each. While the fourth author’s recall the story slightly different, one thing in

common, is the participation of the disciples in this miraculously feeding. Three of them have the exact same line, “You give them something to eat.” John is the only one not to include this line but Jesus still uses these disciples to seat the crowds and gather the leftovers to provide for another meal. Jesus could do this all on his own. We know that. God has the power to do whatever God so chooses. Yet, God has made the choice to create humans and to gather us in as partners to carry out kingdom work. Despite our limitations. Despite our narrow vision at times. Despite our attempts to satisfy first our own needs and wants at times. Despite our own ponderings of, “Really Jesus. With what shall we feed the hungry? We are but a small congregation. The needs are so great in the world. 60 million people are food insecure.”

Yet God loves us. Jesus, the purest revelation of God, compassionately looks down upon us and all God has created and through that love and compassion that are moved to come alongside Jesus as servants. I know this passion yearns deeply in all of you. I know the love of Christ each of you have. I know how desperately you all want to alleviate the suffering in the world: the pain, hunger, illness, hostility, conflict, etc. And I know at times it can seem insurmountable. Impossible. And we and our resources and gifts can seem inadequate. The expectations and demands Jesus places upon his servants can

simply seem too much to bear. We can fall into what is known as “compassion fatigue.” It’s a normal and natural response. There is just too much need. Too much heartache. Too much ... and we who care are so few and our resources are so limited.

Yet, we can’t give up. Jesus didn’t give up on his disciples. On the crowds that continued to follow him. On overcoming the injustices of the day. On bringing God’s grace to all in need especially those on the fringes of society. On us. He saw our great need to be reconciled to God. Our great need to be healed of the wounds left from the chains of sin that bind us. He didn’t give up when the crowds hailed insults at him and shouts of “Crucify him.” He didn’t give up when ruling authorities could have acted justly. He didn’t give up when disciples betrayed and deserted him. He pushed on for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of God’s kingdom. For the sake of God’s people. He pushed on and bore the wounds of the world. To save the world.

We can’t give up even when fatigue sets in. Even when it seems we aren’t making a difference. We must hold firm to the faith instilled in us by the Holy Spirit that tells us God can use us. God can take what we have (which is what he has entrusted to us), bless it and miraculously transform it into more than enough. One can of food becomes two cans of food. Two cans of food becomes

four cans of food. Four becomes eight. Eight becomes sixteen and suddenly we have 20 bags of much needed resources that fill up the food pantry and feed the needs of many in our community. Or one quarter is followed by a second quarter and then a third and so the story goes until all of a sudden we have over 500 quarters in a clear plastic tube that equates to approximately \$130 and comes close to sending a bag of food home each weekend during the school year for a child who may otherwise have very limited amounts of food to eat. Or how about our \$500 check taken to the Synod Assembly this past May to help support hunger ministries within our Synod and beyond. \$500, while a vast amount of money for so many in the world, is a relatively small amount for so many in our culture. Yet, when combined with the other congregations of our synod God miraculously transformed that \$500 into nearly \$50,000. And finally, this story I came across.

A church had been in decline for thirty years. Typical story. The neighborhood changed, the surrounding community got younger, and the median age of the church got older. In desperation they had a meeting in which they recounted all the challenges they faced. Their building was deteriorating. Most of the people were on fixed incomes, so church finances were a problem.

At the meeting, after recounting their woes, their pastor led them in prayer, asking God to show them a way forward.

When the pastor said, "Amen," one of the oldest members blurted out, "Babysitting."

What? “Babysitting. Nobody in this room has a real job anymore, but most of us here do some childcare from time to time. Babysitting. Maybe that’s the last thing we’ve got left to give to this neighborhood.”

Well, to make a miraculous story more concise, a dozen or so volunteered to offer free babysitting at the church for anyone in the community on Friday and Saturday nights. They put up a big, bright sign on the church lawn.

Short story made miraculous, that church is no longer in decline. Why? Because of some courageous, generous women, but also because Jesus took what they had, blessed it, and used it to bless many.ⁱ

What do we have? It may seem limited. It may even be an idea that seems ludicrous. But what do we have that Jesus can take, bless, and use to bless many.

Thanks and praise be to God, the source of all we have. Amen.

ⁱ Will Willimon, *Will Willimon’s Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 45, No. 3 Year A (Abingdon Press, 2017) p. 19.