

Matthew 14, Feeding 5000, August 2020

I think I mentioned the carrots in our garden to you earlier this summer, or rather the lack of carrots, apparently due to bad seed. Now, lemme tell you about our lettuce! The lettuce seedlings we found this year were teeny and fragile looking, and I wondered what kind of luck we would have as I planted them. Well, apparently lettuce likes hot, dry weather, because those plants went crazy. We've never seen so much lettuce! Fortunately we like salads, but there's just no way we can keep up with what we're harvesting, and there's also no way to preserve lettuce for eating later on. So, if you see us coming, you would be wise to walk away and make sure your car doors are locked, or you may find yourself with a bag of Berge lettuce in hand! It's a prime example of going from not very much at all to enough, in fact of going from not very much at all to *more* than enough; just like we find in our Gospel lesson today.

I'd like for us to think about that word "enough" for a moment. Because quite often, we worry about whether we have *enough*....enough health coverage, enough money in our retirement fund, enough food to feed a gathered group, enough time to get our work done, enough patience to get through this pandemic. We tend to fear we don't or won't *have enough*, in spite of the fact that we are arguably among the most prosperous culture of any time or place. But this reality of ours was completely different than that of those in our Gospel lesson today. Those alive in 1st C. Palestine could only dream of having *enough*; they were used to making do with *less* than enough. A problem like ours of how to distribute excess produce in a timely manner would just not have been on their radar. Theirs was a culture of scarcity, a subsistence lifestyle. Having an abundance of food was quite literally a rarity for the folks in our Scripture

lesson. Privation was their lifestyle and malnutrition a frequent guest. That's one of the reasons we read of so many who were ill, crippled, blind, and so on in the Scriptures----the chronically malnourished are far more vulnerable to such fates. So ironically, whereas so many of our health problems 2000 years later relate to our overindulgence in food and drink, their situation was in dire contrast. Which makes this miracle of Jesus all the more spectacular for them. They *rarely* had *even* enough, and here they had so much *more* than just enough; they had an abundance! The people were staggered by this miracle; that may be why it is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels.

Let's set the scene for this event. Our lesson began, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew". What was it Jesus heard? He heard about the death by execution of his cousin and fellow prophet, John the Baptizer. Herod had beheaded that courageous voice to silence him. Jesus is grieving. He's been actively engaging in his ministry of teaching and healing, and now he's sad and tired, and he needs a break. He gets into his kayak and paddles towards a lonely bay to have some much needed time to himself. (Or the 1st C. Galilean version of that action!) But such is his charisma and appeal to the crowds, that they walk around a portion of the Sea of Galilee in order to meet up with Jesus when he comes back to shore. And what a crowd it was! Picture Christ, maybe a little refreshed by his time alone, pulling onto shore to discover waiting for him a crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children---meaning what? Maybe 10,000 or more total? An enormous crowd of people! It's a wonder he didn't turn his kayak around and keep going! Wouldn't irritation and frustration be the natural reaction to this overwhelming and never-ending barrage of need? But no, we are told this, "he had compassion for them and cured their sick." Wow. That's a standard of generosity of spirit and depth of compassion that I can

never hope to achieve. But that's God for you! Never a scarcity of love. And in this story, there's no scarcity of any kind by the end!

I wonder where we might see ourselves within this remarkable story? We generally focus on Jesus, who works the miracle; or on the crowd who is fed. But aren't we at least as likely to stand, in our contemporary equivalent, in the *disciple's* sandals? I mean, actually doing the Jesus thing, the miracle of multiplication of 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish into a meal for 10,000, has never worked for me; probably not for you either? So, we're likely not Jesus in this story. But, we're not necessarily just the crowd, either, waiting hopefully to be fed. Aren't we, in fact, followers of Jesus? Isn't that why we're worshipping today? Which means *we* are the *disciples* in this story, and the disciples have an interesting and crucial role to play here.

Let's think about this. Jesus has been performing healings, meeting people's physical needs, probably for hours. But, now it's evening, and there's this large crowd that has a ways to travel back home before they can eat a simple meal. And they probably didn't have a huge lunch or breakfast to carry them through beforehand, because that wasn't their lifestyle-- unlike us. They are farther away from home than they planned, because they've followed Jesus around a portion of the Sea to stay near him. Very likely had not brought provisions, because they hadn't realized they'd be making this big of a trek. So, here they are, tired, hungry, and far from home, and it's the *disciples* who are trying to figure out the logistics. It's not like there's a Kwik Trip or a McDonald's near by. So, the disciples do the math; they scope out the size of the task and the impossibility of meeting the challenge and—they give up. It can't be done. They tell this to Jesus, quite sensibly, apparently assuming he's overlooked it while being busy with healing the

sick. They assemble their talking points: “We’re in a deserted place. The hour is late. Folks are getting hungry. Send the crowds away before things get ugly.” And in one of the most surprising twists in the story, instead of agreeing with their sensible plan, Jesus turns the tables on them. “Oh, they don’t need to go elsewhere. *You* give them something to eat,” Jesus tells them. That must have set them back on their heels. They are saying that the task is too large, too complicated and simply can’t be accomplished, and Jesus says, “Yes, it can.” And they want *Jesus* to take matters in hand, and Jesus instead says---“*You* do it.” Wow. Not what they wanted or expected to hear, but it does cause them to actually take stock of their resources, and it turns out they don’t actually have *nothing*...they just have a very little: five loaves, two fish. But, in assuming that this very little will be meaningless, they’ve forgotten with whom they are dealing, because God can always do a great deal with a very little. And so the disciples are able to do what had seemed impossible before: they feed the huge crowd. They gather the little; Jesus performs the miracle of multiplication; and then it’s the disciples who give the loaves to the crowd, and it’s the disciples who, crazy though it seems, then pick up the *leftovers!* Leftovers were unheard of in this time and place! Even just having *enough* was a privilege rarely experienced. The abundance of this miracle cannot be overstated.

I can’t help but feel that there is a message for us in this interplay between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples, like us, but perhaps with better reason than we have, looked about them and concluded, “We have nothing.” I mean, we get it--There’s just not enough to go around! Their mindset is one of scarcity, and indeed, scarcity was a daily experience for them. But *our* mindset also so easily becomes one of scarcity, even though scarcity is a relatively rare experience for us. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, while there have been some

temporary shortages, they have generally been merely temporary. And not being able to procure toilet paper early on or Clorox wipes in the present are not exactly life-threatening shortages. And yet, how quick we all were to perceive and respond to even the *threat* of shortage....which is why there suddenly *was* a paucity of toilet paper and other items. In our anxiety, in our fear that there *wouldn't be enough*, we promptly started hoarding. Not the most flattering self-portrait of us all. But a telling example of how easily we perceive scarcity. We have nothing! There's not enough! Somebody ought to do something about this! And Jesus says, "Seriously? You really have nothing? I don't think that's so. Take another look. *You* do something. *You* find a way to provide what's needed."

We are living in complicated times right now. And apart from some overly enthusiastic garden lettuces or the supply of black flies along the Shore, we may fear that we don't have enough, that we're down to nothing. As a congregation we might be tempted to look at the months of uncertainty ahead of us and say—"We can't keep up this virtual worship, we can't figure out VBX virtually, we can't keep supporting the church financially, we can't find the volunteers to continue our ministries, we just can't figure out how to do fall programming from a distance, there's not enough, we're down to nothing." And I would guess that if we were say to Jesus, "We can't do this. We've got nothing", he might well replay---"Seriously? Look again. You see scarcity; I see potential. You can do it. You've got this! And with my help, there will not only be *enough* of what is needed, but *more* than enough--leftovers."

His words are a vigorous reminder to us that while God does the miracles and the multiplying, we definitely have a role to play, too---to do *something*, rather than nothing, for the

good of someone else or for the common good. That tempting but disheartening mindset of scarcity we so easily adopt is *not* in keeping with the kingdom of God. The Kingdom features abundance and generosity of spirit. Because God can always do a great deal with a little, including the small acts of devotion and service we can offer up. Amen.