

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 55: 1-5
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 14: 13-21
August 2, 2020

“God’s Abundance”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Our New Testament story this morning begins mid-stride. We are told, “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” What had Jesus just heard? He had just received the news that his cousin John the Baptist had been killed, beheaded as a sick and twisted form of entertainment for Herod’s guests. Herod was drunk, and pleased by the dancing of Salome his current wife’s daughter, he told her he would give her whatever she asked. She consulted her mother, a woman who hated John the Baptist because he had publicly called her out. Salome’s mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, and that’s exactly what she got. Tragically this type of obscene miscarriage of justice was not uncommon.

Jesus had to get away. He needed time alone to absorb this tragic news. John was not only his cousin; he was a man Jesus respected. It is not too much to suggest that Jesus was grieving. When Jesus took on human nature he became like us and suffered loss in the same way we suffer loss. But his time apart was not to last, because the desperate crowds found him. He may have left in a boat, but the lake was not that large, and they walked all the way around to find him. They arrived in a remote place, because Jesus had been seeking solitude. But as he looked on the people so desperately in need he had compassion on them. Instead of time alone, he ministered to the people, healing them of their diseases and bringing comfort. Although we’re certainly not Jesus most of us can relate to this type of experience. We get home having heard terrible news and just wanting peace and quiet to process it, and instead we are greeted by a family full of demands and urgent needs. Or we go to work thinking we’ll just find a quiet corner to think things through, and instead all hell breaks loose and we spend the morning putting out fires.

As Jesus ministered for hours, the disciples helped, and kept watch. Jesus may not have been paying attention to the time, but they were. They no doubt conferred among themselves. *It was getting late. What was going to happen when these needy people got hungry? Would things get out of control? Maybe the master needs a little prompting.* And so they came to him, and in a bit of a role reversal told him what he ought to do! They said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” But Jesus was not about to surrender his authority so quickly. Instead Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. **You** give them something to eat.”

The YOU in Greek is emphatic. Written English doesn't have the same ability to change emphasis. I resort to underlining or all caps. But this was really clear. "YOU give them something to eat." Now the disciples were on the hook. They replied, "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish." We can imagine them thinking, "*Seriously Lord? This isn't even enough to feed ourselves!*"

Jesus asked that the fish and loaves be brought to him. Then he directed the people to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven and gave thanks. Then he broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the people. He did what the head of the family would do at an ordinary meal. But this was no ordinary meal, because somehow it just kept right on going. Now people argue about this. Was it a flat-out miracle and more loaves kept appearing, or did Jesus' actions prompt people to share? At the risk of stating the obvious, I don't see why it could not have been both. As bread kept coming and people saw there was an abundant supply, they would have opened up their own meager collection of food carried in bundles. The more bread that came their way, the more sharing that would have happened, until all had been fed and were full. And those that had nothing to bring would have been well provided for.

We are told that the number of people fed included 5000 MEN. For some strange patriarchal reason they only counted the men, but added that there were women and children too, which means the actual number was much larger than 5000. The disciples then went and picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces left over. We wouldn't have done that, but we don't live in a society where starvation is always on the horizon.

The Roman Empire in the 1st century was a very unequal place when it came to food access. What we now have labeled "food insecurity" they would have called "life." The majority of the people did not have enough to eat, and what the poor did eat, was poor in nutrition. The bread had so many rocks mixed in that people's teeth were worn down. We know that thanks to archaeology. The condition of their bones also speaks volumes. The ruling elite had a great abundance and variety of high-quality food. But most people lived at a subsistence level. Even the Lord's Prayer includes "give us this day our daily bread." Lack of food and lack of good food was a harsh reality of life. And it had the effect of dramatically shortening the lives of the poor.

We'd like to think that we've moved beyond this, but the world still struggles with hunger. If we organized ourselves differently on this planet we could feed everyone. There are enough resources to go around. But we don't act justly, and climate change, drought, floods and war bring chaos and starvation. More than 690 million people go hungry in the world, affecting 8.9 percent of people globally. 14 million children under the age of five suffer from severe acute malnutrition, and often die as a result. And in America—a nation where we should all have enough, the coronavirus pandemic has made matters worse than they have ever been. More than 54 million people, including 18 million children, now experience hunger.

The numbers can be overwhelming and impersonal. Having a face to attach to them helps us to really "get it." Over the years as I have ministered at Penn Wynne I have met many adults whose childhoods were a nightmare of

neglect and deprivation. I once knew a woman who survived her alcoholic mother's neglect by eating toothpaste and stealing food from the local store. This was a child, the kind of child who could live right next door to you, and yet she did not have food to eat. The school didn't know that this disheveled 7-year-old washed her own clothes in the bathtub and dried them in the oven. They just knew she was a mess. She was doing the best she could do, and no one intervened to help.

Making sure that people have food, clothing and shelter, is a priority with God, and the bible is full of examples of divine intervention to feed people. But when we look at the huge magnitude of the need we usually throw our hands up in despair. *"But Lord,"* we say, *"we only have five loaves and two fishes!"* We don't see what we have. We see what we don't have, and we don't have billions of dollars. The need is so overwhelming it is just too much. We turn to governments to solve these larger problems, because after all, they have more money, right? And don't get me wrong. Contacting our representatives and putting pressure on them to do something IS part of our calling from God. But it doesn't stop there, because no matter what political party is in charge, we can't put our faith in the government. We are to put our faith in GOD. And God is asking us to take our five loaves and two fish and place them in God's hands. It is absolutely amazing what happens when many people put their small amounts together, but adding to that is the God factor, because God can take what we have and multiply it. Instead of looking at the needs of the world with fear and thinking that we don't have enough to meet them, we need to remember that our God is a God of abundance and provision.

Compared to most of the world we are incredibly wealthy, but many people are panicked right now. Because of the Coronavirus the US economy contracted at a rate of 32.9% from April through June, its worst drop on record. And the other nations around the world are in the same boat. But not only can God provide FOR us, even now, God can provide THROUGH us. We can take what we have and ask God to give us generous hearts. In addition to our tithes and offerings the Church website has a special option to feed the hungry. We can also do a little research into charitable organizations and find which ones are legitimate and truly make a difference, and commit to regular support. It doesn't have to be a huge number to make a huge difference. We do not have to meet ALL need. We can't meet ALL need. What God asks us to do is to bring our two fish and five loaves, place them in Jesus' hands, and see what happens next. Amen

Isaiah 55: 1-5

55 "Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,

come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
2 Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
3 Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.
4 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
a ruler and commander of the peoples.
5 Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations you do not know will come running to you,
because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.”

Matthew 14: 13-21

13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. **14** When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

16 Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

17 “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

18 “Bring them here to me,” he said. **19** 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. **20** They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. **21** The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.