

August 6, 2017 Genesis 32: 22-31, Psalm 17, Mt 14: 13-21

More than Enough

Jesus' way of leading is so different than the ways of the powerful in his own day. He will lead in the way of the Shepherd King lifted up so frequently in the Hebrew scriptures. For example in Ezekiel 34: 12,13 the prophet says:

“ As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from the places to which they have been scatted on the day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.”

Well in today's story, the people themselves are coming from many of the towns seeking Jesus who has tried to make a quick getaway after hearing of the tragic demise of his cousin John. This story of the miracle of feeding follows right on the heels of Herod calling for the head of John the Baptist on a plate, fulfilling the oath he gave to his young niece Herodias whose mother Herodias had been upset about John's judgement on her relationship with Philip, Herod's brother.

Here was one example of the corrupt and violent power that dominated the politics of the Romans who had a tight grip on the Jewish people. It extended to all aspects of their lives, including how food was shared. The wealthy Roman elites ate well with varied and extravagant diets, while the peasant populations eat meagrely, struggling with malnutrition and poor health. That is why this miracle story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes had such a powerful and hopeful effect on Jesus' community and the early church, for it appears in all four gospels with only slight variation. Our mystical friend John later extends this image of the feast calling Jesus himself the “bread of life” and including the little boy in his story as a role model for generous sharing. It was clearly a central image and story of the newly forming church.

It is interesting that after the crowds heard about the news of John the Baptist who himself had a following of disciples, that the whole community seemed to come out to find Jesus, their shepherd king. His time of contemplation and prayer didn't last long though for when he comes ashore he sees such a large crowd. Unlike Herod though and the other rulers, Jesus has compassion for the people and cures their sick, who as mentioned earlier, would in their poverty have many illnesses caused by malnutrition and poor immunity.

It is hard to understand why there is still so much hunger and poverty today, which is still related to the extreme inequity in our world between rich and poor and the tendency of humans towards violence and controlling power. In March of this year, the UN declared a famine crisis in many nations of Eastern Africa: Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Kenya. Small-scale farmers supply the majority of food in Africa. But climate change has created a devastating and prolonged drought, resulting in both water and food shortages. Farmers are unable to grow crops and their livestock have died. Ongoing conflict is also contributing to the crisis as many families are forced to flee their homes, farms, and livelihoods. With so much unclean water, now an epidemic of cholera is taking its toll. The United Nations warned as many as 1.4 million children could die of starvation in the coming months. With over 30 million hungry it is really an overwhelming problem.

There is another message that Jesus gives to his disciples when they stand there overwhelmed by the needs and hunger of the crowds facing them late into the night. I don't blame them a bit for suggesting the obvious, to send them away into the villages to look after themselves. I struggle with this constantly when I listen to the news of overwhelming problems in the wider world, or face the problems of great need on our own streets here in Ottawa, especially those around the church who struggle with addictions and homelessness. The needs just seem never ending, whether it is hearing a

young Inuit woman wailing over her lost children on the front sidewalk of the church or a 50 something man from a rural Ontario village who struggles with mental health problems and loneliness, searching for a sense of family on the streets of this city.

What are the issues and concerns that overwhelm you from time to time whether it is in your own family, or maybe through your profession or community involvement? How does your prayer life, your spiritual practices sustain you when you feel overwhelmed?

Jesus challenges his disciples to get involved, to not let him deal with all these people on his own. Even though he is the Saviour he knows he needs some help. He says to the disciples - "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They turn their sacks inside out and only find a few loaves of bread and fish – hardly a feast for thousands. After this evening, they are going to develop a deeper understanding of the line in the Jesus' prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread*. They are being asked to trust in the Way in which Jesus' is leading them, a risky way that invites the sharing of their resources when our natural tendency is to want to hoard our resources for ourselves, especially if they are meager.

Yet this is where the miracle occurs, where we are given a glimpse into the very heart of Jesus and his vision of God's kingdom or a word I believe is very potent– insight into God's *commonwealth*. Jesus takes this small meal, looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples. It reminds us of the same actions and words that Jesus' shared with his disciples at the Last Supper, words of blessing recited at every Shabbat meal. It is an attitude and action that we are invited to practice and live into at every meal we share, either alone or with others, reminding us to nurture hearts of thankfulness for what we do have, no matter how small, to ask for God's blessing upon our food and to make the sharing of it our first act. Gratitude, blessing, breaking open,

and sharing with others – such a simple ritual and yet so powerful, enabling us to be part of the web of sustainable living.

It is the disciples that take this food, once hoarded by them, but now shared with the crowds, involving and transforming themselves by the miraculous sharing where all are fed and satisfied. They might remember even the stories of their own faith in the past, when God provided manna for their ancestors when they were wandering in the wilderness and facing starvation. Or they might take their imaginations to a future time when God's realm is fulfilled and all people are welcomed to the massive Messianic Banquet. They can foresee a time when this might actually happen and it will be amazing!

I am reminded how this miracle of feeding was lifted up at an international church conference held a few summers ago in England, Green Commons, and how Trish Elliot, then Chair of our presbytery then shared how they had experienced Holy Communion at that gathering of thousands sitting on the green fields of England with our own Ottawa Presbytery. We were gathered into small groups of 5 or 6 at Cityview United Church and were given a simple brown lunch sack with a small bun and a bottle of fruit juice and were invited to share with each other in this unorthodox communion, to develop a stronger sense that we were all friends in Christ who could risk doing something a little bit different.

Our own National United Church invited us to be part of the solution to the immense famine in some regions of Africa when they launched an Extreme Hunger Appeal earlier this spring in which we are still invited to send money to our partners through the Mission and Service Fund and through ACT (alliance of Churches Together). Many United Church members have also generously given to the Canada Foodgrains Bank which is providing emergency food relief. (I have left copies of the examples of how you

might get involved in helping to mitigate this food crises on a sheet titled **Take Action** which of course involves the sharing of money, but also your words in political writing and in praying for those who are hungry and helping to relieve the suffering).

What is also wonderful in this well-known miracle story is the way that they actually collected leftovers – 12 baskets full! There is no waste as we live out God’s vision for the world. It reminds of so many people who are involved in that very spiritual practice of recycling and trashing nothing. My partner Grant spends every morning checking out a couples of websites that allow for this ongoing sharing of our leftover goods. One is called Trash Nothing and the other is called Free Cycle. There are many other’s no doubt such as Kijiji Free and we applaud ministries such as St Vincent De Paul that will not turn away anyone’s leftover goods. There is also a new program that seems to be catching on with churches and community groups called “The Big Give” where people bring their ‘stuff’ to share on a particular location and date. The ‘big give’ may be a good name for this story.

At the end of the day, late into the evening the crowds had all eaten and were satisfied – 5000 men plus the women and children, so maybe about 20,000 people – the size of Cornwall maybe. That is incredible! From what seems so little, great things are accomplished when God’s vision and blessing is at the heart of it all. So be encouraged when you see all the inequity, hunger and waste living side by side, for every gesture that you make as you live with a compassionate heart, whether large or small, as you are generous with who you are and what you have, you contribute to the miracle of life that God continues to offer unconditionally to us, through us and to this beloved world.

