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8/6/17--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 14:13-21

IN JESUS' HANDS

What a person takes away from one of Jesus' miracle stories depends a great deal on one's circumstances in life. Take today's story, for example. If you are a person who knows true physical hunger, if you go to bed hungry at night, if you don't have any idea where your next meal might come from, then this story of Jesus feeding the multitudes would have special significance. For such a person, the story would emphasize that Jesus is the one who feeds. Jesus is the one who cares about your body. Daily bread is a gift from Jesus.

But most of us here today do not know such physical hunger. Food is always available to us--and in abundance. We who snack all day long may not be able to appreciate the story from the point of view of one whose insides ache from lack of food, whose bodies grow weak or listless from lack of nourishment. Since our refrigerators and cupboards are filled with food not only for today but also for days to come, since food is available even when we stop to fill our gas tanks, since most of us have the resources to buy whatever food we need or crave at this moment, it can be hard for us to generate the genuine sense of gratitude that a hungry person has for having food to sustain the body for this day. A hungry person reading this story might focus on the precious gift of the food itself.

But I think that those of us who have plenty of food in our lives can also find a message in this miracle story for us. We who seek to be followers of Jesus, we who are part of his church, his community of followers, we too are offered a precious gift in this miraculous story.

In Matthew's gospel, the feeding of the multitudes comes at a critical moment for Jesus. Jesus has just learned about the beheading of his cousin John by the ruler Herod. And

immediately after hearing this news, our passage for today tells us that Jesus withdrew by himself to a deserted place. We are left to imagine what must have been going on inside Jesus' heart and head. No doubt he was grieving the death of his cousin. But also, perhaps he was confronted by other powerful emotions. Perhaps he felt weariness that comes from grief and personal hardships. You know that kind of weariness that can descend when life hands you profound hardships, the kind of weariness that makes you just want to curl up in bed and hide away. Perhaps Jesus felt fear. John the Baptist's death would likely have caused Jesus to confront his own likely death. How hard a truth that would be to face. John's death must have been a sobering moment for Jesus. Maybe too, Jesus felt a sense of urgency, that there wasn't much time left for him to do his ministry, teach his disciples, proclaim the message of God's love.

Maybe this is why Jesus uses the hungry crowds as a teaching opportunity for his followers. When the crowds find Jesus out there in that deserted place and descend upon his solitude, Jesus has compassion for their great need. And he begins to heal the sick. But when the hour grows late, the disciples urge Jesus to send the crowds away so that they can go buy food in the nearby villages. This is when Jesus takes the moment to teach his disciples what being his follower is all about. And he turns to them and says, "You give them something to eat." You do it.

Well, right away the disciples can see the problem with that instruction. Before them are thousands of hungry individuals--5,000 men plus women and children. We're talking around 15,000 people. And all the disciples have is just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. They can clearly see that their resources are not enough. But where the disciples see only scarcity, Jesus sees something completely different. Writer Barbara Brown Taylor remarks that "Jesus knew beyond

a shadow of doubt that where there is plenty of God, there would be plenty of everything else." And Jesus takes these meager resources of five loaves and two fish and feeds the thousands.

Now, we could focus our attention on the miraculous nature of this story. We could spend our time debating whether or not we believe that miracles can happen. We could contemplate the nature of this miracle--did God truly make 5 loaves and 2 fish feed 15,000 people or did Jesus inspire people to share what they had brought with them. But I think it is more useful to contemplate what was the message the gospel writer of Matthew wanted his listeners to take away from this story. Think about the early church. They didn't have big church buildings like the one we sit in today. They met in houses, tiny mud and rock houses. They were not wealthy. They didn't have retirement funds or health insurance or college savings funds. They lived day to day. They didn't have large membership rolls. Maybe 12 or 15 people might have been able to gather together at a time. Matthew wrote to a people who had meager resources, scarce resource. So think about what kind of a message this miracle story might have offered them when they hear Jesus in this story say to his followers, "You give them something to eat." You do it. And then Jesus demonstrates what is possible when we place our scarce resources in God's hands.

It is ironic that we Americans, we who are among the wealthiest people in the world, tend to operate from a mindset of scarcity. In fact, often the more we have the more we tend to feel we lack. No matter how much money we have in our bank accounts or pension funds, we tend to feel that we don't have enough. Our modern lives are filled with machines that do things for us--machines that do our laundry, wash our dishes, transport us to distant places, help us do our work and communicate with others around the globe; and yet, despite all these time-saving machines, we still feel that we don't have enough time. We are highly educated, trained in our jobs, well

read and informed, and yet, we still undervalue our abilities to make a difference in the world. Surrounded as we are by blessings, material as well as emotional, many of us still operate from a perspective of scarcity. We worry we don't have enough. We are fearful of sharing for fear we will lack for something. We are insecure about our own abilities.

I believe that many of us do indeed want to be people who follow Jesus' example of compassion. We want to help others and make a difference. But when we take stock of our lives, our abilities, our supplies or resources, we feel we do not have what is necessary. This is not only true of us as individuals but it is also especially true of the churches in America today. Even when we desire to act compassionately, we are keenly aware of our scarcity: our lack of sufficient financial resources or our low membership numbers. And so even when we want to help people in need, we feel stymied by our perceived scarcity.

But then Jesus turns to us, to you and to me, and he says to us, "You give them something to eat." You do it. And he shows us what can be done when we place our lives and our resources in Jesus' hands.

Some of you know that my family traveled this summer to the African country of Tanzania. As always when visiting countries of the developing world, I came away with a renewed awareness of how so many of the world's people live on so little. And yet, we met so many wonderful people endeavoring to do God's work with so very little resources. Our main contact in Tanzania was a Tanzanian Lutheran pastor named Godrick. He and his wife have so very little material or financial resources compared to any one of us sitting here today. But they are a little better off than most of their neighbors. And so they use what meager resources they have to help others. They have taken to live into their home a number of individuals in need, some of whose children they are helping to pay for their education. The money Godrick

received from helping organize our group's events in Tanzania was going to help a woman in his church pay for surgery she needed. They live and operate from a position that God can take their meager resources and bring forth abundance.

I think this is the message the gospel writer Matthew was trying to pass on to his audience of early Christians, who themselves had very meager resources. The gift Jesus offered in this miracle story was not only the abundant food itself but also the gift of what God can do with us and our resources, however modest, when we place them in Jesus' hands. There is great need all around us. And while you may not be able to do much about the conflict in the Middle East, you can seek reconciliation and forgiveness with a family member or friend or colleague. You may not be able to solve the complex problem of health care, but you can extend compassion and care to a friend receiving chemotherapy. You may not be able to solve the problem of world hunger, but you can work in a food pantry or advocate for policies that address poverty. Jesus turns to us and he says, "You do it." You feed. You forgive. You heal. You love. You console. You speak out. You welcome. You teach. You give. You offer whatever resources you have, however meager, trusting that in Jesus' hands God can bring forth abundance of blessings.

In a short while we will gather at the Lord's Table. Here we remember how Jesus took simple, ordinary elements and transformed them into a lesson about God's love and forgiveness. And look at how these meager resources have been nourishing people in body and soul for 2,000 years. And how today, we will gather again to be fed in abundant ways by these meager but powerful resources. And then, once we have been fed, filled, and satisfied by the little bit of bread and the little bit of juice, Jesus turns to us and says, "You give them something to eat."

You take whatever is at your disposal, your life, your abilities, your resources, your compassion, your love, to become the bread and wine for others. In Jesus' hands, we are able.

Please pray with me:

Dear God, remind me to share whatever is in my basket today. You will do the rest. Amen. *

*written by Rev. Karla Miller, and posted on **A Place for Prayer**

<http://revgalprayerpals.blogspot.ca/>