

“You give them something to eat.”

Matthew 14:1-21

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

I was blessed with some amazing parents. They insisted that I not only attend worship and Sunday School, but they also modeled for me what it meant to live as a follower of Jesus Christ. Living as a disciple meant serving those whom Jesus came to serve – the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the lonely. So one Saturday morning a month, I would volunteer with my father delivering food to the poor and the shut-ins living in downtown Atlanta. I can remember climbing 4 or 5 flights of stairs in an apartment building (the elevator was always out of service) to deliver a grocery bag of food to a blind elderly man. I remember visiting a woman who lived in government housing, who was confined to a wheelchair. Because of my father’s efforts to teach me about gratitude and generosity, the face of poverty was not just hypothetical but relational. I learned from my father that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, could not simply turn away from the needs of our neighbors. It was not enough for us to pray in church, “Our father, give us this day our daily bread”, we had to share our bread with the “our” part of that prayer. We don’t pray, “My father, give only to “me.” When Jesus taught his disciples to pray for daily bread, he then showed them how to share. And so, we come to this morning’s scripture reading.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Matthew 14: 1-21

The feeding of the 5000 in Matthew's gospel follows on the heels of an account of the death of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. John was murdered as a result of a banquet (another story about food) hosted by the rich and powerful of the royal court. He was beheaded at the whim of Herod's wife and daughter.

Surely there could be no starker picture of the depravity of humankind, human cruelty, when human life is treated with such triviality. Herod's birthday party is a microcosm of all that is wrong with humanity – pride, arrogance, abuse of power and resources, murder and a dismissal/destruction of human life. Matthew may have seen in John's death the extent of the evil in humanity, the evil from which Jesus had come to save us.

When Jesus hears of John's beheading, he withdraws by boat, needing just little time and space to grieve the death of his friend, his cousin, the one who had baptized him. Perhaps Jesus even saw in John's death a foreshadowing of his own death.

As Jesus withdrew, the crowds learned of his destination and traveled on foot to be in the presence of this remarkable man. As Jesus disembarks from the boat, there, before him, was another picture of humanity – people in need, hungry to discover meaning to their lives, desperately longing to be loved. Carrying all these needs of humanity and more, the crowd brought to Jesus the sick, the blind, the deaf and the lame. And the scriptures say Jesus, who was probably feeling the weight of his own grief, “had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

When the sun is dropping toward the horizon and night is rapidly approaching, the disciples come to Jesus and abruptly tell him what time it is, reminding him of where he is and instructing him as to what he should do. The dialogue, minus the usual respectful words, suggests that Jesus needs a little prodding to get back on track. He has deviated from the schedule and the organizational plan. The disciples conveniently and neatly dismiss the crowds and their needs. When faced with the overwhelming need of such a crowd, the easiest approach is disengagement or dismissal.

Jesus rejects our tendency to disengage with the sins and needs of this world. Instead of saying, let's get rid of these difficult people" he said, "We are involved with these people. In fact, I am partly responsible for them being here so late. This is not a buck we have a right to pass on. We must do something about their hunger – its not just about talking the talk, but walking the walk. You give them something to eat." That's the first take away lesson from this story of the feeding of the 5000. We are connected and called, even commanded, by Jesus to care for and to feed those who are hungry.

The second lesson we learn from Jesus' actions is when we are caught in a crisis, we are to identify what resources are inherent to the situation. He caught his disciples by surprise by asking them to do something that had never occurred to them in their panic; namely, to find out what they had going for them amid all that seemed to be going against them. The vastness of the problem captured the disciples' attention and focus more than the possibility of resources. Fear has a way of making us shortsighted and reducing our field of vision. Shortsightedness denies the presence of God in all that God has created. Jesus is basically saying that in every wilderness experience there are "five loaves and two fish" if we only have eyes to see.

The third lesson – Jesus took the available resources in his hands, lifted his eyes to heaven in thanksgiving to God and then, without panic or anxiety, set about the task of meeting the hunger in the crowd. He did the best he could with what he had to offer. Somehow, what seemed like a little, with God’s help, became more than enough and even then some.

In the story of the feeding of the 5000 we see that Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples to distribute the bread and the fish to the hungry multitude. So it is that God calls us and uses us to do his work in the world. And our actions of love speak louder than any words.

Saint Teresa of Avila expressed it this way, centuries ago:

Christ has no body on earth but yours;

No feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which he sees the compassion of the world; yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless.

Jesus commands that we not only talk about our faith – but that we engage in ministries of faith.

Some years ago I chaired our presbytery’s outdoor ministries committee. It was our responsibility to oversee the functioning of three camps: Albemarle on the coast, Presbyterian Point on Kerr Lake and Camp New Hope in Chapel Hill. I tried to volunteer time each summer at all three camps as their chaplain. One year, as I was serving as chaplain at Presbyterian Point, several of the counselors asked me to help them work their way through a problem they were having with a ten year old camper. He was one of our scholarship children which meant he came from a family with limited income.

Apparently, at breakfast in the dining hall each morning, he was stuffing his coat with as many boxes of cereal that he could carry and then, once back in the cabin he would squirrel the boxes away in his suitcase. I agreed to talk with him the next morning on the dining hall porch after breakfast. I began by gently explaining to him that he was welcome to as much food at each meal as he wanted. But, why was he taking cereal boxes back to his cabin and hiding them under his bunk? His response: “It is summer and my brother and I, sometimes, have nothing to eat at home. When we go to school, we know we can have breakfast and lunch. I want to take these cereal boxes back to my little brother because I know he is hungry.” Now folks, no child, no child should ever have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, but in the state of North Carolina, 1 in 5 children live in households where there is a struggle going on to put food on the table. They are living in their own wildernesses and Jesus commands us just as he did those disciples by the Sea of Galilee: You give them something to eat.

As I have talked to my clergy buddies in the past several months, I sense that there is a malaise wrapping itself around the church. We seem to all be waiting for this pandemic to lift so that we can return to our normal routines. I have recognized that same inertia in myself as I have patiently waited for the end of coronavirus. But this story of the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus’ commandment to respond to the needs of those hurting in the wilderness, those who are hungry, jolted me. How can I preach this story of feeding the hungry without responding to the hungry in our community? This coronavirus is not lifting anytime soon so what are we waiting on? Have we put being the church/the body of Christ in the world on hold? There are hungry people gathered before us and Jesus is saying to us – “you give them something to eat!”

I decided to check out what was happening with the Central and Eastern North Carolina Food Bank – a non-profit group which I have interacted with many times throughout my ministry and this church has supported, just this past Spring, by sending money to them from our Mission Ministry Team funds. The Food Bank of North Carolina was established in 1980 and it serves 35 counties. It has partnered with over 800 agencies such as local food pantries, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens. Since this pandemic began in March, they have seen a 38% increase in food insecurity. People who have lost their jobs and health insurance are having to make a decision between paying their rent or buying food. In NC, prior to Covid19, 545,000 people were facing hunger. Today 750,000 people, 250,000 being children, are at risk. We have a Greenville branch of the NC Food Bank, serving 5 counties. Their data is showing 80,000 people, 20,000 children and 6,500 seniors are living with food insecurity. The need for food in our community is growing and Jesus is saying to us today, even in the midst of, or maybe even more so, of a pandemic – “you give them something to eat.” We need to pick ourselves up out of our inertia as we are waiting for a pandemic to subside and engage in the ministry to which Jesus calls us. I want to challenge each of us to bring food each Sunday to church. I will take that food to the Food Bank here in Greenville and invite anyone else who would like to volunteer to transport food to join me. But the least we can do is bring something to share. The Food Bank is always in need of peanut butter, canned vegetables, fruit and meats. If you cannot join us on Sundays, call me and I will pick up your bags of food off your front porch, or drop them at the church in the bin outside the front door.

You give them something to eat. There is much suffering in this world. But we can help alleviate that suffering by sharing what we can as we are able even in times of crisis and scarcity. And what we think is a little – well, God can multiply it beyond our imagining.