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8/6/23, Matthew 14:13-21

"You Give Them Something"

I remember the moment it occurred to me how much a part of the culture the story of the "Feeding of the Five Thousand" has become. Years ago, I spent some time with a rabbi. He was a dear friend of a friend of mine. I was at his house on a night he invited guests, who were also Jewish, for dinner. As we all took our seats around the table, everyone was raving about Rabbi Arthur's fried eggplant.

He came in and proudly placed the platter in the center of the table. But as he looked at all of us and then looked back at the platter, he became concerned that he didn't make enough. He began apologizing for the fact that our portions would have to be smaller than what he envisioned.

That's when one of the people at the table said, "Well, didn't Jesus feed a large crowd with just a couple of loaves of bread?" That's a comment one expects to hear from church folk setting up for coffee hour or a potluck supper. These were Jewish people citing a story from the Christian scriptures.

That's how much a part of the culture this story is. Other than the death and resurrection of Jesus, it's the only story found in all four Gospels. The alternative version, "The Feeding of the Four Thousand," found in Mark's Gospel and in Matthew's Gospel, make six versions of this miraculous feeding.

We love the message of this story. God provides. Where the disciples perceived scarcity, there turned out to be enough to feed an enormous crowd. In fact, there was more than enough. After the meal, they went around and collected the leftovers. Our God doesn't want anyone to go hungry. Therefore, God provides abundantly, even miraculously.

It's very well known that sharing meals was a hallmark of the ministry of Jesus. He was born in Bethlehem. The word Bethlehem means "house of bread." One of the chief charges against Jesus leading to his crucifixion was the way he shared meals. He ate with sinners and tax collectors.

And, on the night before he died, he shared bread and wine with his disciples and instructed them, "Do this in remembrance of me." The way Jesus wanted his followers to remember him after he was gone was with a ritual meal. I wonder if Jesus knew that 2,000

years later, people would still be gathering at tables to bless, break, and share bread in remembrance of him.

So, a message we can take from today's story is the imperative to share food, to recognize there's enough for everyone. We take that seriously here at First Parish. We house community meals, open to all, twice a month.

Also, I'm thrilled that so many folks in town contribute to our monthly food collection in front of the Parish House. Our Mission Board does such a good job, we're sometimes asked to skip a month because the food pantry is so well-stocked.

I think feeding the hungry is a vitally important thing to do. However, if that's the only take away, this story could have been a lot shorter. Prior to the feeding, there's a whole narrative. The disciples went to Jesus and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

Their instinct was to send the crowd away. The disciples made the assumption that someone else would be more equipped to meet the need. In fact, that crowd might not have found enough food in the surrounding towns. The crowd is identified as 5000 men, not counting women and children. For the record, I would have counted the women and children.

In total, it may have been 6000 or 7000 or 8000 people. Even in the surrounding towns, there probably wouldn't have been enough to feed such a crowd. If we sent 6000 people, down the street, to Bagel Basket this morning, they'd be overwhelmed. They'd run out of bagels.

The disciples calculated that what they had was not adequate, so they wanted to send the crowd away to get what it needed. The way Jesus responded is the aspect of the story that captivates me. He said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Jesus puts it on them. You do something. You respond. You meet the need that's right in front of you.

I think this is the crux of the story, because I think it's a common assumption, we all might make at one time or another. What we have to offer someone in need is not adequate. I'm talking about more than food now. Sometimes people hunger for affirmation.

Sometimes people hunger for hope. Sometimes people hunger for companionship or forgiveness or encouragement.

My sense is that many times we feel like what we have to offer is not adequate. We feel like we either don't have enough faith, or enough experience, or enough courage to meet the need. Around the church here, I notice it with prayer. I'm always happy to offer a prayer before a meeting or before a meal. I know Pastor Dan is as well. But I love it when someone else offers the prayer, when someone else decides "I can do this. I have something to offer at this moment."

In our feeding story, God was the source of everything that was needed, but for the miracle to occur, the disciples had to offer what they had, even if it seemed inadequate. I believe that each one of us has something to offer that no one else can. Nobody has your exact personality, skills, and gifts. You are one-of-a-kind. In any situation, you might have to be the one to offer what it is that you have.

Actor Meryl Streep once said, "Everyone has something unexpected to offer and the job of acting is to pull it out of each other." She was saying that every actor has something worthwhile within. When actors work together, their task is to pull out emotions, vulnerability, or unexpected responses from one another.

I think Jesus did that with his disciples. He wanted them to know they possessed what was needed to meet the needs they encountered. You give them something to eat. You offer a word of encouragement. You minister to someone in need.

And it may be true, we sometimes might not have a lot to offer someone in need, but it doesn't take a lot to keep a person from starving. Sometimes all it takes is a small gesture of kindness. Every one of us has enough words of encouragement to keep someone going a bit longer. That's our divine mission. That's what Jesus wanted his followers to do.

In the letter of 1 Peter, it says, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." In a way, I think that was the lesson for the disciples in today's feeding story. Always be ready, yourself, to have something to offer someone in need. My mom always carried something in her bag or pocketbook: a bite to eat, something to drink, a toy. You parents and grandparents know that you never know when a meltdown will happen in the back seat. The faith is like that. As people of faith, we should always have something we can pull out when a need arises.

I'm a believer that most preaching that takes place in the churches doesn't happen from behind a pulpit. In other words, most of the preaching that happens here at First Parish doesn't happen on Sunday morning when pastor Dan or I step into this pulpit. It doesn't even come from the pastors. It comes from you all interacting together: in one-on-one conversations, or in the middle of the Bible study, or at a youth group meeting, or during coffee hour.

In a few moments, we will celebrate the ritual meal Jesus instructed his followers to share in remembrance of him. Every time we celebrate communion, you serve one another. You enact the words of Jesus by passing the bread and the cup to your neighbor.

It's a reminder that Jesus has given us the power to feed people. It symbolizes our divine mission to feed the hungry. It's not a 3-course meal. It doesn't replace dinner. But it's more than enough. Everyone in this room, everyone you know, everyone you encounter is hungry for something. You give them something to eat.