

Problem or Opportunity? 2020
Matthew 14:13-21

Matthew 14:13-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

When Kathy's car broke down on the way to Wilmington,
the driver of the tow-truck looked under the hood, shook his head
and said that it was probably a complicated & expensive problem
that might cost more to repair than her car was worth...
... which was pretty discouraging and unsettling to hear.

We had it towed to a garage owned by a mechanic we trusted,
who said he would call after he'd had a chance to look at it.
I felt anxious about the situation and our very limited resources.

Early the next week,
Ron called for us to come by and pick up Kathy's car.
He' already done the repair, and it cost less than forty dollars.

Isn't it remarkable and truly a great blessing
when someone can somehow completely transform
a problem or disaster, that has us in a tizzy of hopeless panic?

The problem is that we tend to focus and concentrate on the problem,
that we measure and calculate the resources we've got to work with,
and allow that to define our sense of what might be possible...

**... which is to forgo the possibility that God might be up to something,
which is what's going on with the disciples in the Matthew text.**

The context is that it had been a very long and difficult day.
Jesus and the disciples had received some terrible news
that to impress a dancing girl at a drunken party,
King Herod had John the Baptist beheaded.

Jesus and the disciples were trying to slip away into the wilderness
for some quiet time and rest to work through their sadness & grief.
But instead, a crowd followed them,
disrupting and disturbing the peaceful solitude they needed,
to which Jesus responded with loving compassion, mercy & healing.

While the disciples saw a bothersome crowd of the sick and demanding,
Jesus saw an opportunity to reveal God's grace and desire to heal.

They were in a very desolate and isolated desert-place,
and as evening came, the weary disciples reminded Jesus,
that it's late, send the people away so they can eat, vs. 15

the disciples came 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."

Realistically, the disciples were being quite right & reasonable.

There is a huge crowd and Jesus had been healing the sick all day,
and as the disciples pointed out, vs. 17,

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

But then Jesus responds, vs. 16

"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

In the Greek, the word "you" is repeated for added emphasis.

"You! You give them something to eat." --

- indicating that **the solution will flow through the disciples,**
for as it turned out, God was up to something.

We all know the story, and other than the resurrection of Jesus,
it's the only miracle that's described in all four Gospels,
which suggests that it must have been very important
and meaningful to the early Church and believers.

Jesus uses the resources they had with power & compassion, , vs. 19-21

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and **blessed** and **broke** the loaves,
and **gave** them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And **all ate and were filled**; and they took up **what was left over** of the broken pieces, twelve
baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Also in the Greek, where it says, "Jesus gave to the disciples",
the verb tense indicates that **Jesus continued to give...**
... he kept giving more to the disciples as they gave to the crowd,
shifting the story's perspective
away from a perceived scarcity to the abundance of God.

And at the end, in the text, the fragments they collected
were actually more bread than they had when they began.

Those meager rations and resources too scarce,
were more than enough when entrusted to Jesus.

Isn't it truly amazing and wonderful and encouraging
what God can do and accomplish with even so very little?

Skeptics have tried to explain-away the miraculous aspects.

Some suggest that the 5 loaves could have been enough
to give just a tiny bit to each person in the crowd of 5000+

and using really tiny baskets to gather all the crumbs...
except that the text says, vs. 20, **And all ate and were filled.**

Other skeptics suggest that seeing the meager 5 loaves shared,
encouraged the other people in the crowd to also share
the food they brought and had tucked away in their robes...
so the lesson is about sharing with our neighbors...
... **perhaps an interesting sermon, but not faithful to the text.**

... and

Such explanations are really distractions and speculations
that miss the point, the lesson and importance of this story.
What matters is not **how** the feeding of the crowd was accomplished,
but two things revealed about the nature of God and our calling.

1st that ours is a God of compassion, grace, blessings and abundance.

2nd that we too as followers of Jesus Christ, as disciples,
he wants to feed **his gracious love** into the world **through us.**

Often we are **quite right** when we look at a task or challenge in life,
measure realistically our limitations, our lack of resources
and recognize that there's not enough to get the job done.

So too the disciples were **quite right**
in recognizing that 5 loaves could not feed that huge crowd...
... there really wasn't nearly enough – **there was way more than enough.**

Through this miracle story,
Jesus is teaching us that ultimately life and mission are about
the goodness, truth, promises, blessings and purpose of God,
far more than
the scope of our problems, or the challenges we face in life.

So the question is not, 'do we have enough'
but what might God accomplish with what we do have?

The lesson and truth is, God never gives us a task or job to do,
without also providing in abundance and in creative excess
the means and resources needed to accomplish that task well.

Though sometimes we forget, doubt or choose to ignore,
the truth is, God has promised to provide all that is needed
to accomplish well **whatever it is that God wants us to do.**

We see the size of the problem & focus on the resources we're lacking.
Then we let our fear and our sense of scarcity do the calculations,
which then overwhelms and limits our faith and trust in God,
* **making us afraid and hesitant and even unwilling**
to step out in faith and offer even the small amount we have.

I'm reminded of hearing a story that happened stateside during WWII,
when sugar was scarce and was being rationed,
and a man at a lunch counter demanded more for his coffee...
... and the waitress replied, "**Just stir what you've already got.**"

“Just stir what you've already got.”

Our call is to be faithful with whatever we've already got,
trusting in the Lord's promised provision of abundance--
- and assurance of all that is needed to accomplish God's purpose.

That is a critical truth that we need to hear and hold onto ---
for these are difficult, distressing and troubling times,
and it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the problems around us.

Today none of us know when the Covid-19 danger will be resolved,
or what our church's mission, ministries and programs
will look like in the future after all of this.
But we do know for sure that God is up to something wonderful,
that amazing opportunities to serve faithfully will abound,
and that hopefully all of us will want to get in it!

Yes, we do struggle. Yes, change, uncertainty & loss are difficult,
and we can easily feel overwhelmed or hopeless in our situation...
... but by God's grace and good purpose, **that is not the final word,**
or that the little we can do does not make a real difference.

I'm sure you've heard the story
about an elderly gentleman walking along the surf,
bending over, picking up starfish stranded by the tide,
and one by one tossing them back out into the water.

And a passerby observing his ongoing and endless effort to save,
impatiently and disapprovingly called out, "Why bother?
There are thousands of starfish, you can't save them all,
and for all your effort, it won't make any difference."

But the old man leaned over again, picked up another starfish,
and tossed it back out into the sea, then glancing back,
with a knowing smile and a twinkle, hollered to his critic,
"Yes, I know. But it made a difference to that one!"

I believe that is the key to doing faithful ministry these days.
We can't do church, worship & fellowship like we used to anymore,
but our call is to build closer connections & relationships,
things, that can make all the difference.

seemingly little

The critical truth revealed in the story about feeding of the 5000
is that even the smallest of contributions are significant,
when we are attentive and responsive to God's grace and Spirit.

The message is clear.
Trust to Jesus whatever we have and whatever we can do,
and by grace, it will be enough to make a real difference.

So as we approach the Lord's Table of grace and sacrament today,
are we more focused on our problems and fear, limits and obstacles
or on what God can accomplish in us, with us and through us
if we more fully trusted and joyfully embraced God's call?

Let us today claim for ourselves the promise of Psalm 138:7-8

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me... and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.