

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now 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. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

A Picnic to Remember August 6, 2017

On Monday Anna and I went on a hike at the Moses Cone Estates in Blowing Rock. We decided to take a Day-cation. We packed a lunch in our day packs and hiked about 5 or 6 miles. We knew we would need some water and food so we planned accordingly. We stopped about half way through our walk and spread a ground cloth and sat and had a delightful lunch of chicken salad sandwiches, lemonade, a nectarine, and Lays potato chips! It was perfect, and like our story today, there were even some leftovers.

This is a powerful story for us today and is one of the only stories that is in all four of the gospels and that should tell us that it was important for the Christian community then and now. It is a story that has deep roots in the history of those hearing it. They would remember the stories of the manna in the wilderness, or of the twenty loaves that Elisha was said to put before the people that fed 100 people with some left over, and it would remind them of the last supper which we celebrate today where Jesus broke bread on his last night with his friends. Bread and fish that have become powerful symbols for our shared lives in Jesus' story of reconciliation and redemption.

In our story this morning Jesus has gone off to be alone. He has just gotten the news that John has been beheaded by Herod. That in the midst of a raucous and drunken birthday party Herod made a foolhardy promise to his wife's daughter and had to follow through with it to save face. You can't help but believe that Jesus was saddened by this. That the one who baptized him and who came before him proclaiming the kingdom of God has been killed. John was his fellow prophet and friend and family, and they had a deep love and respect for one another.

And if they could kill John with such impudence perhaps he wasn't all that safe himself. Grieving and troubled he headed for a quiet place to be alone with his thoughts. But the people, who probably also had heard of John's death, were seeking Jesus and soon found him. And the remarkable thing about this story, at least one of the remarkable things, is that even in his deep sadness Jesus has compassion on those who come to him. He chooses to heal and comfort, to bless and inspire, to give himself to the people even when his own heart is broken. Compassion is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and this may be something the disciples will learn today as well.

This turns into an all-day affair and as it moves into dinner time and stomachs are starting to rumble, the disciples try to wrap things up for Jesus and get people to head on home, or where ever it is they are going, so they can have their dinner too. But Jesus will have none of it. He says to them, “They don't have to go home, there's no reason to run everyone off.” But? But? How will they eat? How will they make it through the

night? Always lots of excuses when the disciples are around, aren't there? Just like us, I guess. Jesus says, "You feed them!"

Now the other thing that I find so interesting and really at times so funny is this dialog between Jesus and his disciples. I am assuming that all twelve of them are there. They have been with him for a good while now. They've seen how he does things and he has certainly let them do a good bit of it with him and for him. He has sent them out in pairs to minister to the people. They've cast out demons and healed the sick in Jesus' name as well as a host of other things I'm sure. And so I find it funny that when Jesus turns and asks them to feed the people, they freak out. I can imagine them turning to one another with a little bit of panic in their eyes, saying, "What have we got? Didn't you bring more than that? How much money do we have? He wants us to do what??? We don't have enough!"

What do you think your response might be if Jesus turned to you on that day? I can think of many times in my life when presented with an opportunity to help others that I may have said the same thing. "I don't have enough. I can't spare what I've got. Check with me next time and I'll have something then. My basket is empty so, sorry."

There were twelve disciples, the very ones Jesus hand picked, balking when he asks for help. And it ought to make you cringe just a little bit when you consider that we are very much just like those disciples at times. But the good news is that Jesus doesn't let our resistance and fear get in the way. He just says, "What have you got in your bag? What can you share? Give me what you've got and let's see what happens!" And when they give what they have to Jesus, he blesses it, and then he asks them to serve the people. And suddenly there is more than enough.

It seems obvious to me that we need to think of this story as a continuation of the many stories we've already heard in the last few weeks. How this story is perhaps a practical application of those many parables about seeds being scattered, and about the mustard seed that becomes a huge bush where birds can build their nests. Where yeast permeates the whole batch of flour and there is an abundance of bread. Maybe this is where Jesus shows his disciples what it might look like if we applied those wonderful ideas that were generated by His parables. And what I find interesting and often overlooked in the story is that Jesus blesses the bread and fish that the disciples give him, but then he gives it right back to them to serve the people. Jesus isn't the one passing the basket around. He takes what they have and blesses it and then lets them serve. He shows them how to do it and they are the ones who are being astounded by what Jesus can do through them and maybe that's the lesson for us as well.

Can you imagine what they must have been thinking when they got to the end of the meal and there were 12 baskets full of left overs? Talk about being blessed. Talk about being awed. "Did you see what I saw?" They might say to one another. "Can you believe what happened?" People needed to see someone share what they had even if it was only a little. When they did, they brought forth their own gifts of food and fellowship. This is quite a contrast to the party Herod was having which ended in death and shame and fear. This picnic was about abundance and joy and surprise even in the midst of death and sadness. And it was about community.

And perhaps that is one of the real miracles of the day. That a handful of disciples learned that when they give what they have to God, He can turn it into a blessing for others. It reminds me of a story of a young student who was going on a field trip. They were leaving early in the morning and everyone was supposed to bring a bag lunch for the day. If you didn't have your lunch you couldn't go on the trip. Somehow in the rush to get out the door on time and getting to school, he forgot his lunch. When he got to school it looked like he was going to have to stay behind because he had no lunch. When the other students realized what was happening they all looked in their lunch bags and each gave a little something from their own lunches in order to make a

lunch bag for their fellow student. This is a miracle not unlike our miracle in today's story. We are part of the solution and Jesus expects us to participate.

Now we can sit around and talk about doing for others until the cows come home, but if you don't actually participate, you will miss the blessing. I've noticed that when I give my time and energy to God's work, to Kingdom work, that just like the disciples, sometimes I say, "all I have are these 5 loaves and 2 fishes and they can't possibly make any difference." And sometimes that is what it feels like when faced with going to visit the sick or dying, helping with a Habitat build, being a listening ear for someone who just can't figure it out, driving someone to the doctor's office, preparing for an outreach program, or giving time and resources. I think you know what I mean.

I just don't know that my little efforts and gifts can make a difference. But Jesus says "Give them to me!" And when I do as Jesus asks, "to feed them," whoever they are, my basket gets filled too. My blessing is multiplied by my willingness to serve, to feed, to listen, to pray, to work, or build houses, or bake bread, or lead in worship, or send a card, or deliver a meal. All these simple things are returned as baskets-full of leftover blessings. A picnic like no other picnic I've been to.

We often think of this story as a miracle story where Jesus feeds 5,000 plus people with a couple of fish and bread. And that may be part of the story. but I suspect that the truth is that no one in this culture would think of traveling more than a day's journey without some sort of provisions. They would most likely have some water or wine, some bread and dates, maybe dried fish or some other type of meat, cheese or fruit, seeds and nuts. And if they were out looking for Jesus with no idea where they might find him, I'm guessing they were prepared for a journey.

It reminds me that encounters with Jesus are always two-sided. Encounters with the Holy usually include the One who seeks and those who are seeking, doesn't it? Think of the many miracles Jesus performed and you will always find someone who was reaching out, seeking, praying, or crying. I'm remembering the woman with the hemorrhage and the lepers calling out to be healed, and a father begging for his child, a Centurion asking for his servant, and there are many others. And Jesus usually responds by saying, "Your faith has made you well." Maybe miracles are something we do together...with Jesus. And so, it wouldn't surprise me at all that when the people see Jesus and the disciples open their bags and share their food that they would open theirs as well.

And maybe the best part of this miracle story is that through Jesus, a crowd of 5-10 thousand people chose to share what they had hidden up their sleeves and in their baskets. Wouldn't you like to see a story like that on the news this week? That in His presence abundance supplants scarcity. Not only scarcity of food but, I think, scarcity of Joy, of Spirit, of Wholeness. People are hungry for many things and not just food.

So what's in your picnic basket? Is it just a couple of fish? A few loaves of compassion? Just a couple of talents you'd rather not share? Has it got a hammer and a screw driver in it? Or maybe a gift for numbers? Or maybe a talent for singing, or sewing, or reading to children, or leadership, or financial resources. And what happens if you are willing to give your talents and gifts to God? Or are you going to hang on tight to your stuff because you think there won't be enough? Or can we trust in God's abundance, that if we loosen our grip on things, there will be enough for all with blessings left over? Jesus says "Whatever you have, give it to me and I will bless it." And if you dare to do it...if you dare...better bring an empty basket with you for all the leftovers! Bon Appetit! Let us pray.

Plenty

John van de Laar/Jim Taylor

How did it happen, God? How did we come to believe in scarcity? In “not enough to go around;” In “you gotta look after yourself”? How did we miss the plenty bursting out around us? How did we fall for the deception that what we can grasp in our hands would ever be enough? How did we grow so blind and so foolish, that we would allow so much beauty and life, joy and laughter, sharing and love, to pass us by unnoticed?

How poor we have become, and how poor we have made others, simply because we forgot your infinite, overflowing abundance; because we allowed ourselves to think that sharing and giving leaves us with less; because we nurtured appetites that are never satisfied unless they have far more than is needed, thinking our gluttony would silence our fear.

Forgive us, and teach us about your generosity again; remind us that you are able and willing to do far more than we can imagine; and open our eyes to the plenty we enjoy, the plenty we can share, and all the plentiful goodness in our world that cannot be owned, but can be enjoyed by all.

And Loving, Abundant God, we thank you that as we approach this table of grace and wonder this morning that you would fill us with true abundance. That simple bread and juice would remind us of your deep and abiding love as we seek to live lives of grace and mercy. That we would remember the long history of your compassionate care and feeding of our bodies and souls.

We lift up to you all the peoples of the world who both know you and those who hunger to know you. Let peace reign where war increases. Let compassion flow like rivers of mercy where hatred and apathy destroy, and let healing and wholeness have dominion where illness and despair have taken root.

We offer now our prayers both silent and spoken for those in our family and community and ask that you hear our offerings of praise and petition.

Holy God we thank you that you called us into this community of faith and ask that you strengthen us and open us up to share the gifts that you have blessed us with. Banish fear and scarcity from our hearts and let us offer ourselves to you to be used in ways that we can't yet imagine. That “daily bread” might be the mantra of our lives as we live in faith and service. We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, the breaker of bread and hearts, who taught us to pray saying...Our Father...