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Matthew 14:13-21
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That Loaves and Fishes Thing Still Works!

So, you may be wondering, “What does the feeding of the 5000 have to do with stewardship? Certainly, you can’t be asking me to feed 5000 in this community – are you?”

No. I am not. But bear with me and I hope when I get done, it will make sense.

A few years ago, flight attendants for Southwest Airlines began spicing up their pre-flight instructions to passengers with humor.

Soon other airlines followed suit. After all, why talk to passengers if they’re not listening? Here are a couple of classics:

One flight attendant began her routine this way, “In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, masks will descend from the ceiling.

“Immediately, stop screaming, grab the mask, and pull it over your face.

“If you have a small child traveling with you, secure your mask before assisting with theirs.

“If you are traveling with more than one small child ... pick your favorite.”

Another attendant concluded a flight like this, “As you exit the plane, make sure to gather all of your belongings.

“Anything left behind will be distributed equally amongst the flight attendants.

“Oh, and please do not leave behind unruly children or spouses.”

On a Delta flight, the pilot announced that one passenger had left his belt and his jacket at the security checkpoint.

“Pick them up today,” he said, “or look for them tomorrow on eBay.”

Educator Parker J. Palmer was en route to a conference when the plane he was on made an unexpectedly long layover at an airport.

A truck that was supposed to deliver the refreshments for the next leg of the journey had broken down.

Finally, the pilot decided that it was more important to get his passengers on their way than to wait for the snacks to arrive, so he took off.

As soon as they were in the air the passengers started grumbling. “A ticket is a contract,” one said loudly, “and snacks are part of the contract.”

“I ought to sue,” another muttered.

A man stood up and said, “I’m a lawyer. How many are willing to join in a class action suit?”

A minor mutiny was in the works.

Then something interesting happened. A flight attendant came on the public address system. She began with the familiar information on such flights:

“Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the seatbelt lights. We have now attained a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet.”

Then she said something quite extraordinary:

“Having served many of you on the first leg of this flight, I know some of you still have your bags of peanuts, which you stuffed in your pocket.

“How many do we have? Five?

“Can I ask that you open them up and share them with the people around you?

“I’m also sure that some of you have mints. How about passing those around, too?

“Those of you with newspapers, hey you can only read one section at a time. Spread the other sections around for others to read.

“Some of you are parents or grandparents. Take out the pictures of your children or grandchildren and show them to the folks sitting around you.”

With that brief announcement she changed the emotional climate of that flight.

Later, when the flight attendant came near Parker Palmer’s seat he asked her,

“What’s your name? And what’s the name of your supervisor? I want to write a letter of commendation. That was the best example of group leadership I’ve ever seen.”

To which, she replied, “You know, the loaves and fishes thing still works.”

Ahhh.... Loaves and fishes ...we know that story – I just read it. But, let me give you some background.

Here is the setting. Jesus has just received the news that John the Baptist has been executed by King Herod.

Saddened at the death of his cousin, Jesus sets off with his disciples to find some solitude, a place where he can be relatively alone with his grief.

But Jesus is at the height of his popularity.

A large group of people follows him everywhere he goes. Instead of solitude, Jesus is confronted with still more people in need of healing.

And you know what a softy he is.

Jesus cannot observe human suffering and do nothing. He has to help, he has to heal, because he feels such great compassion for people.

In fact, he was so determined to heal as many people as he could that day that he lost track of time.

His disciples come and offer a helpful reminder. “Jesus, it’s way past dinner time, and there’s not a McDonald’s or Burger King or Taco Bell in sight.

“You need to send these folks home now so they can get something to eat.”

Send them away so they can get what they need. That sounds distressingly familiar, doesn’t it?

“Send them to the local mental health center so they can get some professional help. Send them to the Department of Human Services. Send them anywhere but here.”

“I mean, we’ve got all the problems we can handle – right here. We don’t need any more.

“Let the government take care of them. Isn’t that what we’re paying all those taxes for? Surely there’s some program to take care of them. Just send them away, Jesus.”

A couple of years ago there was an article in *The Christian Century* about the problem of homelessness in America.

It was a long article, discussing every possible aspect of the problem.

And in this long article, this extensive examination of a serious problem, in a Christian publication, not one mention was ever made of the church and what the church could do to help.

Homelessness? Sounds like a government problem to me! Send them away, Jesus.

But Jesus says, “No. You give them something to eat. You take care of their needs.”

And despite the protests of his followers that they just don’t have enough to do that, Jesus takes what they do have – a lunch basket brought by a small boy, containing only a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

And he blesses it, breaks it, and gives it back to them and – what do you know? – It IS enough! In fact, it's MORE than enough. There is what, twelve baskets of bread leftover?

Now, if this sequence of events – Jesus taking the bread, blessing the bread, breaking the bread, and then giving the bread – if this reminds you of an experience you've had right here in church, you're right.

Every time we come to the Lord's Table we remember this fourfold action of Jesus. Taking, blessing, breaking, giving...

The progression from weary disciples, to recognition of human need, to sharp demand, and then to a gift that is more than enough is repeated every time the church gathers to break bread – which we did just last Sunday.

And there's always enough to go around, isn't there?

It's awfully hard sometimes to detect a tone of voice in a written text, but I think I know what tone of voice Jesus used when he spoke the words, "You give them something to eat."

I believe the emphasis was on the "you."

"YOU give them something to eat. Don't send them away. You can take care of their needs. YOU give them something to eat."

That may sound harsh, especially coming from Jesus, Mr. Compassion himself. It may even seem as if Jesus has compassion for everyone except his disciples.

“But Jesus, don’t you know how tired we are? It’s been a long day, and I’ve been working hard all week.

“I’ve been under a lot of stress lately, too, Jesus. You just don’t know how hard life can be sometimes.

“Bill collectors are hounding me, my doctor tells me I need to lose weight, my dentist tells me I need a bunch of work done on my teeth.

“I’d like to help out, but I just don’t have that much to help with.

“There’s not much in the basket – a couple of fives, a twenty, some singles – a few loaves, a couple of cold fish.

“That’s it, Lord. I’d like to help you, but I just can’t.”

And Jesus says, “Bring me what you have.” And he blesses what we have, then tells us to distribute it to the crowd.

In the story of the feeding of the multitude, we see that Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples to feed the hungry crowd.

That’s one of the reasons we have the food pantry and we’re always asking you all for more and more food.

It still works that way today. God calls us and uses us to do His work in the world, to literally feed hungry people.

But we are also called to be God’s hands in spiritually feeding the lonely and the depressed and the hurting, the broken people who live all around us. We are called to speak a word of hope and love to others.

A preacher I often quote, Rev. Johnny Dean, explained it this way.

“Too often,” he says, “we think that giving our lives to God is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the altar, saying, ‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all to you.’”

“But the truth of the matter is that God sends us to the bank and tells us to cash that \$1,000 bill in for quarters.

“And then we go through life giving away twenty-five cents here, fifty cents there, and so on.

“Instead of watching a ball game, we spend some time visiting a lonely person in a nursing home who has no family.

“Instead of sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, we get dressed and go to teach Sunday school.

“Instead of playing games on the computer, we listen to a friend tell us about her problems, even though we’re tired and have problems of our own to deal with.”

These are the moments in which the grace of God can work through us to help another human being, to feed the hunger of the heart and spirit.

They may not be spectacular miracles, but these are the things we can do to bring meaning and significance to our lives.

We may feel overwhelmed by the needs and demands of the world around us.

Hurricanes in the Panhandle of Florida, war and rumors of war in the Middle East, the clean water epidemic in Africa, homelessness and hunger right here in our own backyard.

We just don't see how our meager resources could possibly help.
And they don't UNLESS we give them.

What would have happened if the boy who offered the disciples his fish and loaves of bread decided there was just enough for him and his family?

Jesus surely could have performed his miracle in some other way.
But that wasn't the point.

The fact that this is the ONLY miracle Jesus performed that is recorded in ALL four Gospels means that it is pretty important.

The boy gave all that he had – because he knew there was a need. I don't think he reasoned that “this isn't going to go very far – I think I'll keep it.”

No, he offered what he had – maybe knowing that Jesus could do more with it than he could. And he was right.

Jesus can do more – but first we need to take that initial step of being willing to give.

We cannot alleviate world hunger – BUT we can feed one person and then another and then another.

We can't stop all the hurt that permeates our society and our world – BUT we can listen to a hurting soul and offer a shoulder to cry on.

We can't do everything – BUT we can do one thing.

What do you have to give? Time? Money? Talents?

As we begin our stewardship campaign this year, may each of us prayerfully decide how we might best serve the kingdom.

And then stop talking about it and JUST DO IT!

Amen.