

“Blessed, Multiplied, and Transformed”

Matthew 14:13-21

Rev. Liz Kearny

Longview Presbyterian Church

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

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” It would be easy to skip over this verse and head straight to the miracle. But it’s important to understand that leading up to this miracle, Jesus has just received

word that his cousin, his mentor, the one who baptized him in the Jordan River - John the Baptist - has just been beheaded by Herod. John had spoken openly about Herod's immoral relationship with Herod's brother's wife, Herodias, and this speaking truth to power led to John's murder by the state at Herod's command. So not only is Jesus grieving the loss of his cousin and contemporary, but he is also looking square in the face of what awaits him if he continues his own ministry of challenging the empire's values of greed and corruption by preaching a Gospel where the poor are lifted up, the lowly are empowered, demons are cast out, and the sick are healed.

And in Jesus' attempt to just get away to a quiet place in the midst of this reality, maybe to weep, perhaps to have it out with his Father in prayer, or just to have space to reflect, he is confronted from another side with the overwhelming need of so many who still need healing. The crowds have followed him by the thousands, bringing to him their sick to be healed. A corrupt, unjust empire on one side and a tidal wave of human suffering on the other, two sides of the same coin.

We, too, live in this moment in the midst of our own tidal wave of human suffering, with over 150,000 dead because of COVID-19 and no foreseeable end in sight. The pandemic itself has put into sharp relief the ways in which Black and indigenous communities of color are hit the hardest because of the white supremacy that has infected every last one of our institutions in America. And we have watched our nation's leader respond to the uprising led by our Black siblings by sending federal agents into our cities to kidnap protesters in unmarked vehicles to be detained against their constitutional rights. An unjust empire on

one side. A tidal wave of human suffering on the other. Two sides of the same coin. And if you are like me, you have never felt so small.

So I can clearly hear my own sentiments in the disciples' words to Jesus as it starts getting dark: '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.' There is much we could read into these words, but maybe because of where I am today, I hear myself: "I don't know what to do with all of this, Jesus. And I'm too exhausted to figure it out. Please send these problems away from my doorstep. Send them to someone bigger and better who has more experience. Send all of this, all of these people away." Suffocating under the knee of a greedy empire's hold on their region and overwhelmed with the masses in need of life-saving care, the disciples' imaginations remain incredibly small, keeping them focused on off-loading responsibility, stifling all creativity so that only existing systems like villages with patrons selling food at a profit came to mind to address the hunger of the people.

But Jesus, perhaps with a playful smile on his face, sees the disciples' pragmatic but probably avoidant response and he shatters the boundaries of their tiny imaginations. "They need not go away;" he says, "you give them something to eat." The disciples had tried to put the responsibility onto someone else, back on the shoulders of those who were suffering. They tried to send these people back to the same systems that had already been punishing them for being poor - villages where patrons sold food to clients for a profit. But Jesus puts the onus *back on the disciples* - "you give them something to eat." Their imaginations

still hadn't expanded outside the boundaries that had been shattered, and so the disciples replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And I wonder if Jesus' smile got a little wider, 'Bring them here to me.' Maybe what Jesus was really saying in that moment was, "C'mon, friends. Don't you remember that parable I told you just a few days ago, about an itty bitty mustard seed that grows into a plant so large that all kinds of creatures can make new homes in its branches? Have some imagination!" The crowds sat down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and fish, gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone that day got all they wanted to eat. There was abundance. They took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And well over 5,000 people were fed.

As part of his address during the Digital Mass Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington this past June, the Rev. Dr. William Barber II tweeted, "We must make sure, in all this upheaval, that we don't ask for too little."¹ We hear the same call from our Black siblings leading this uprising. They are inviting us not to reform a system like policing, that was born as the security system to catch runaway enslaved Africans and to keep Black and brown people in the Reconstruction Era south in control of white land owners, a system that has now resisted decades and decades of attempted reforms. No, they are calling us in clear terms to defund the police so we can completely reimagine what safety and justice looks like in a world where God's rule is real, a world that Isaiah imagined. This may sound extreme to those of

¹ Rev. Dr. William Barber II, Twitter - @RevDrBarber - <https://twitter.com/UniteThePoor/status/1270897391345025024>

us who are white and have always felt protected by the police, but let me remind you that this world is one that Isaiah already imagined, where people beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, where we don't invest in violence and militarization but instead in communities of people in desperate need of resources that bring life, a world where none of us need to learn war anymore. And if we are really following Jesus, we will find that he is not calling us to be passive allies in this reimagining, but rather active co-conspirators. Jesus hands back to us the very problems of injustice and suffering we so desperately want to get out of our sight and tells us to put on that yoke of his, to learn from him. We feel small and we know we don't have enough. But Jesus asks us for what we do have. And when we hand it over to him - our time, our attention, our money, our showing up to the local government meeting or the protest or the Zoom webinar or the hard conversation - the Trinity itself wraps our offering in blessing and multiplies it. God multiplies it as God did with the offering Congressman John Lewis packed in his backpack for that day he planned to walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama - one apple, one orange, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a political science book and a book by a trappist monk named Thomas Merton - things to read in the event of his arrest. The folx speaking at Congressman Lewis' funeral this past week mentioned this backpack and its simple contents multiple times as the nation grieved together. And they recognized that Congressman Lewis would take that little offering with him for that historic walk where he would suffer a fractured skull from that atrocity called Bloody Sunday, where he and so many other civil rights leaders were beaten for their walk to justice. And yet, that

offering of himself, when he decided as a young person to say 'yes' to Jesus' invitation to give the suffering masses the food of justice, it grew into a march that multiplied into more marches for voting rights, which eventually led to the passing of the historic Voting Rights Act.

Friends, Jesus can make feasts of our small offerings. But we have to get off the sidelines and start co-conspiring. We have to say 'yes' like Congressman Lewis to getting into the good trouble Jesus was always known for. Whatever the Spirit has been poking and prodding us to step into, we have to actually step into it. We have to take the finger pointing to another person as the responsible party and place it on our own hearts, our own hands and feet, remembering that *we are* the body of Christ called to act in faith in this world. And as our offering is multiplied, our imaginations will be multiplied too. The mustard seed will sprout and grow branches of life-giving shelter we never thought possible. Multitudes will be fed until they are full, not because they paid the already-wealthy to get that food, but because our God, in the words of Isaiah, used *us* to provide the wine and milk that can be bought without price. And thus the real miracle unfolds - the miracle that transformed our imaginations into expansive canvases with no boundaries, the miracle that took that simple offering from our trembling hands and blessed it into a meal that would turn the world upside down. May it be so with us, disciples of Jesus. May it be so. Amen.