

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 2, 2020, The 9th Sunday of Pentecost/The 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14:13-21

The Feeding of the 20,000 Today

This week I spent time with the story of the “Feeding of the 5,000”, and even though I thought I knew this story pretty well after all these years, I experienced the story in new ways. It reminded me of the importance of seeing with new eyes when we read the Bible. It also reminded me of a story I haven’t thought of in years. It’s a story of a child I knew in the first church I served.

Many years ago (24 years), when Daniel was in Kindergarten and lived in Detroit, his mother called me to tell me that what had happened the previous Saturday. She and Daniel were walking into the Handy Andy Hardware store when Daniel pointed across the parking lot to a man from India, dressed in his white robe and gold turban.

Daniel spoke with awe in his voice and said, “Look Mom, it’s Jesus.”

Sue tried to explain that this man was from India and that’s how some people from there dress, but Daniel would not be talked out of it.

All through Handy Andy’s he talked about how excited he was to see Jesus in his neighborhood.

Then, while his mother was reading a label on a can of paint he stopped talking, grabbed her arm and said, “Oh my gosh, it’s a staple.” Sue turned and looked down the aisle and saw a woman from India dressed in a sari. “Daniel, what’s a staple?”, she asked. He answered, “Mom, you know, it’s a person who helps Jesus, and (pointing toward the woman) That’s a staple.” “Daniel,” Sue asked, “Do you mean a disciple?” “Yes, he answered, a staple.” And then all the way home he talked about how excited he was to have seen Jesus and a staple all in the same day, in his neighborhood

(Story told May 1996, Grand Rapids HS Baccalaureate, Reif Center, MN)

Today I’m going to ask us to see Jesus and the staples, or disciples, in our own neighborhoods, and in our lives, in new ways.

The first way I’m going to do that is to ask you to join me in renaming this story. You may have noticed at the end of the story Matthew tells us a lot about the culture of the time when he says that 5,000 were fed, “besides women and children.” So maybe one of the ways we can see this story with new eyes is to call it the “Feeding of the 20,000” from now on. Then we will be a lot closer to the real numbers of men, and women and children that were fed by Jesus and the disciples that day on the hillside above the Sea of Galilee.

Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Hare, Douglas R.A., *Matthew*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 165.4

This was clearly an important story in the years after Jesus return to heaven, because all four gospels tell it. But since we’ve hopefully moved past the days of “besides women and children,” please join me in this renaming of this important, familiar story.

I want you to know that this week is the first time I’ve paid attention to when the feeding of 20,000 took place. I’ve told you many times in sermons that when we read parables told by Jesus or stories about Jesus, it is important to look at what is happening around the story. Clearly, I didn’t follow my own advice the other times I’ve read, or preached on this story.

Jesus is with his disciples and they receive the heart-breaking news that John the Baptist has been murdered by Herod, the ruler of the region, at Herod’s Birthday party. You may remember that

Herod had taken and married his brother's wife and John the Baptist had told him repeatedly that this was against the ways of God. So, Herod had John arrested to silence him. Herod wanted to have him put to death, but was afraid of John's popularity with the crowds, so he just kept him imprisoned.

Then on the fateful night of Herod's birthday, his step-daughter danced for the gathering, and Herod liked it so much he promised her anything she requested.

At the guidance of her mother, Herodias, Herod's wife, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And her wish was granted.

This was the horrific, devastating story that Jesus and the disciples heard that day. Understandably Jesus wanted to be alone.

This was his cousin John, the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah. This was the man who had baptized him in the Jordan River, the one scripture had said was a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. This was a person close to Jesus' heart who had been brutally murdered.

So, Jesus took one of the fishing boats and went across the sea to be alone in a deserted place.

Let yourself imagine a time when you have gotten the news of the death of a beloved family member or friend. There is that initial searing, hollowed-out feeling. There is sorrow that often doesn't have words; there is that near inability to take in and believe what you've heard.

This may be what Jesus was feeling as he headed across the Sea for the deserted place.

This moment of great sorrow is how the story of the Feeding of the 20,000 begins. Jesus' cousin John is dead, and he is going by boat to a deserted place.

Now, when you imagine the Sea of Galilee don't think of an ocean. Think instead of a really large inland lake. It is only eight miles across at its widest point.

So, when Jesus, up at the north end of the Sea, set sail for a deserted place, he could be seen by those in the small villages along the Sea. The crowds who followed him would have seen where his boat was going. By the time he beached the boat, the crowds had already regathered, seeking the healing that he offered.

In the midst of his sorrow and loss Jesus looked out at the crowd, the really large crowd who had gathered.

I don't know about you, but I would have wanted to get back into the boat and row away as fast as I could.

But Jesus looked at the crowd and Matthew says "he had compassion for them and cured their sick." This word "compassion" in the New Testament is a wonderful word that literally means to feel something in your guts, to feel it deeply, viscerally. In Greek, it even sounds like what it means, *splagchnizomai*. As one of my seminary professors used to say, Jesus felt it in his gizzard. (Dr. Sandra Brown, Princeton Theological Seminary)

Jesus had gut-deep, visceral compassion for the crowds. In the midst of his grief, he turned toward the crowd and healed their sick friends and family. He did that all the rest of the day, until late in the day.

By then the disciples had also arrived at this deserted place, that now had 20,000 people in it. The disciples were grieving too, they too wanted to be alone. They too had lost someone important to them.

When they saw the crowd, the now hungry crowd, they wanted them to go away.

So, they asked Jesus to send the crowd away so crowd could buy their own food in the nearby villages. But Jesus said, “the crowd doesn’t need to go away; you give them something to eat.

Let yourself imagine being a tired, grieving disciple, surrounded by 20,000 hungry people, hearing Jesus say: “You give them something to eat.”

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011, p. 308.2.5

In the Greek it’s clear that Jesus is emphatically saying to them, *you, you* do it, *you* feed them.
Interpretation, *Ibid*, p. 167.2

But all they have are five small loaves of bread and two fish; probably dried fish that people commonly carried for their meal. They had a little bit of food, really not even enough for themselves, but definitely not enough for the crowd.

But Jesus took the bread and fish from them, he ordered the crowd to be seated and then Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples to give to the crowd. Jesus had the disciples give the food to the hungry people.

Jesus used just what they had and it was more than enough; twelve baskets full of more than enough.

I realized this week, that this isn’t just a story of Jesus feeding the 20,000 people, it’s the story of the disciples feeding the 20,000 people.

What would you have felt if you were one of the twelve, carrying around a basket, gathering up the abundance of the leftovers?

What would the growing weight of that basket have meant to you?

In the midst of his own grief, Jesus healed. And Jesus, using the disciples and what they brought, fed the crowd. He changed the lives of those twelve disciples, and the lives of all of us disciples who have come after them.

Jesus shows us the face of God’s love that will go to any depth to bring us healing and nourishment.

Jesus also shows us that we are needed too.

With whatever little thing it is we can bring with us, even if its only five loaves of bread and two fish, God can use us to care for God’s people.

In fact, Jesus asks it of us, as he did of those disciples, *you, you* do it!

And using just us, and the small things we bring with us, Jesus can love and feed and care with great abundance.

See Interpretation, *Ibid*, p. 167.4.

So, as we enter our fifth month of living with a world pandemic, as we continue to live with both the completely necessary and completely unnecessary unrest in our nation’s cities,

and as the November elections draw ever closer,

how can we not feel overwhelmed by what is happening in our world today?

Into the great emotions of these days, some might even say the 20,000 emotions of these days, it is easy to be overwhelmed.

It is easy to wonder what is going to happen next.

It is easy to feel scared and anxious about what is going to happen to us:

How are we, and our families, and our country, and our world, and our church going to live through these days and survive?

The story of the Feeding of the 20,000 is a gift to us this morning. It shows us that even when the situation seems impossible, insurmountable, filled with grief, and sickness and hunger, Jesus is present.

Jesus shows up in each of our neighborhoods, in the neighborhoods of the world.

Jesus shows up when we don't know what to do.

Jesus shows up when the situation in our world overwhelms us.

Jesus comes to us with gut-deep compassion for us. With healing for us.

And Jesus asks us to be staples, to be disciples, who bring whatever little we have with us so it can be used for others.

Because what we have seen on that hillside beside the Sea of Galilee is still true today:

Jesus has an abundance of love for everyone,

and when we listen to him,

when we follow him,

when we bring ourselves,

together we can help give that abundant love away

and there will always be more than enough for everyone,

because that is God's way of persistent, extravagant love.

See Bartlett, *Ibid*, pp. 310.2.8 to 312.2.2)