

Pastor's Message – 8/2/20  
Matthew 14:13-21

Our Bible reading today starts out, “As soon as Jesus heard the news . . .” What news? If you haven't read what came before the passage today, you might not remember that Jesus has just heard the news that his cousin, we know him as John the Baptist, had just been beheaded by King Herod. You might remember the story of how Herod's wife's daughter had so pleased the King with her dancing that he promised to give her whatever she asked for and, that was, at her mother's suggestion, the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter.

Another thing you might also be missing in the story today is the little boy that John remembers in his gospel with 5 loaves and two fishes. Maybe it's not important where the bread and fish came from. I can't imagine Jesus needed the boy to do the miracle and feed 5,000 men – not including the women and children who were probably also there.

I suspect that Jesus was grieving the loss of his close friend and confidant, a member of his own family. Unfortunately, the crowds of people who were following Jesus around, looking for his teaching and his healing, would not leave him alone to grieve. They saw where Jesus and his disciples were headed across the lake and so they all proceeded on foot so they could be there, waiting for him, when he landed on the other side of the lake.

What we find out is that even though Jesus needed to get away and deal with his grief, even though he may have been exhausted and in despair, when he got out of the boat and saw all the people who had come all that way for healing, he couldn't turn them away.

So even though he was tired and grief stricken and may not have had much left to give, he had compassion for them and he continued to heal their sick. He healed until night fell, at which point his disciples, who were trying to bring healing to their exhausted teacher and friend, said to him, “Come on, Jesus. It's really late. We are out in the middle of nowhere and there are no stores nearby. Send these people away. Tell them it is time to go home for dinner. You need a little time for yourself and they need to find themselves some supper.”

What did Jesus do? Well, he didn't follow the advice of his disciples and send them away. Some today would have advised him to practice better self-care. Some today would have told Jesus why he shouldn't have fed the 5,000 – why he should not have given them a hand-out. Instead, he reached deeper within and said, “Listen, guys, these people are hungry. You are right

about that. But don't send them away. YOU feed them."

And they responded by telling Jesus that they didn't have enough. Unfortunately, that seems to be the default position of too many of Jesus' followers. We answer,

"I have nothing."

"I'm too old for this sort of thing."

"I'm sorry, but I have issues."

"I'm too busy."

"I've already given and done my bit."

"We should let the younger folk do it."

"I'm not the pastor."

"I don't know too much about the Bible."

"This is not my gift."

"I've got too much on my own plate right now."

The disciples when told "you give them something to eat" were unaware that they had the resources to fulfill Jesus' command. They didn't know it, but they did have something!

Jesus' point is clear: You give what you have and I will take care of the distribution issues.

The miracle, then, was not only one of feeding, but of opening the imagination and faith of those doing the feeding. The miracle for us may be thinking outside the box and not expecting different results by working harder at the same thing.

I've seen neighborhood library boxes where people can leave and take books, but not too long ago, I read about how in some neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, Argentina, you might pass a small café and see a refrigerator sitting up against the store wall. Over the fridge is a sign, which reads, "Take freely, only what you need."

Seriously. People can walk up to that fridge, open the door, take what they need and walk away.

These "solidarity fridges," or "social fridges," are a way of showing to the poor and needy that there are, in fact, people who care about them, stand with them and want to help.

The sidewalk fridges remove to a great extent the need for the poor and homeless to beg for food. It's not like a soup kitchen where the homeless have to line up, hold out their plates and a worker fills their bowls with soup or food. No, in this model, the homeless or poor can get food themselves, take what they need and leave the rest.

The food itself is put into the fridges by café and restaurant owners

and sometimes by concerned citizens. By putting food in curbside fridges, cafés are redistributing food that otherwise would've been thrown in the trash and wasted, while, at the same time, helping to feed people in need.

Luis Pondal, who owns a restaurant in Tucumán, Argentina, explains: "I was sick of seeing how food got thrown away and then shortly afterward, people were foraging for it. ... Why not give it to them with some dignity?"

The movement has spread to Córdoba and other cities in Argentina, and now, it has jumped to other countries as well -- countries like Saudi Arabia, Spain, France, and even India.

Of course, you can't just leave *anything* in these fridges. The rules are pretty strict: no meat or eggs and packaged or canned goods cannot be past their use-by date. Moreover, anything prepared at home must include a label about *when* it was made.

And -- no raw fish!

Bread is okay.

But no fish.

Unless you're Jesus. Then you accept fish and bread, even if the donation isn't very much. In today's Bible story, the donation was five little barley loaves and two little fish.

Yet, this little faith-filled donation fed thousands!

Can we do something like that?

We live in a disposable society and, before the coronavirus pandemic we often heard "Reuse, Recycle, Reduce," and now we find a way to donate more and more to landfills. One of the things about the pandemic that has bothered me is that I can no longer use my own grocery bags. I have accumulated so many plastic bags, I could sell them back to Piggly Wiggly. And all those bags are being stored in my basement or going into the landfills.

As we have moved to a pick-up/take-out restaurant environment, consider a take-out, fast food meal. The bag it came in, the wrapper, a paper napkin or two or three, a paper or Styrofoam cup, a plastic knife and fork, -- and then it all goes into the trash or on the road sometimes. It's all disposable, after all.

We are a disposable society. Manufacturers even plan for it -- many things we used to fix we now throw away, because it's set up to work that way. We have a whole industry built on our disposability -- the garbage industry. We are no longer impressed with something like Jesus' miracle of feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. He had twelve big baskets of leftovers -- by today's methods he'd need twelve garbage trucks to haul away the leftovers! It's all for the sake of convenience. Who'd want to put themselves

out anyway? Sure we pay for the packaging, plastic, and metal we throw away. Give that money to hungry people in a less industrialized society? Well ... no. Jesus' encounter with the little boy's lunch and 5,000 hungry people should impress us. The more we give away, the more we have. And less to throw away, yet more to use again.

But God works in different ways. God is a God of abundance. Human beings, all too often, focus on scarcity rather than abundance. In our lifetimes this miracle has been interpreted many different ways. Jesus asks the blessing and the baskets never run out of food because he asked God to provide. Magically, spiritually, the amount of food is multiplied to feed the people. Or maybe some people had food, and when they saw the disciples sharing they too shared and there was an overabundance provided. Could Jesus have fed the 5,000 without the help of the boy and the disciples? Of course He could have! But is that how we believe God usually chooses to work? It really doesn't matter the interpretation. The result is the same. There is abundance; God's abundance is real and present and able to be shared.

In our Bible story today, Jesus takes the loaves and the fish, looks up toward heaven and blesses them. He then breaks the bread and distributes it to the people. The surface parallels to Holy Communion here are clear. We take the bread and wine offered by disciples. We bless God. We seek God's blessing on the bread. We break it and distribute it to those gathered. We gather the remains, resetting the table. And then we are sent, fed and healed, into the night (the world) and our next opportunities to live out our faith.

The disciples said, "How are we supposed to feed all these folks? All we've got is five loaves of bread and a couple of fish among the entire lot of us!" The disciples see only the scarcity of their own resources. They find themselves called to trust God's abundance – abundance that is not quite in view.

Yet in the hand of Jesus, scarcity proves more than enough. Note the verbs Jesus uses in this deserted place. They are the same verbs invoked when churches and followers of Jesus celebrate Communion: take, bless, break, give. Then as now, God uses ordinary elements of life to provide extraordinary grace for living. Whether in fish and loaves, or bread and grape juice: all are welcome, all may eat, all may be filled.

In each of our remote areas, Jesus invites us to come and sit down at His Table. For it is at the Lord's Table we are fed: fed with grace in abundance.