

Matthew 14:13-21

This story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is a favorite of mine...not so much because of the content of the meal (bread and fish) as much as the fact that it speaks to the issue of God's abundance in the midst of tremendous scarcity. Thousands of people were present and almost no food to feed them.

Not that we know anything about scarcity these days. I mean, I still have photos on my phone from my first major grocery shopping trip after the pandemic hit of the bare shelves and signs where toilet paper used to be saying 1 package per customer. One store got creative- their sign read, "Valued Customer: Due to the recent outbreak of stupidity and panic-purchasing, the nation is currently experiencing a shortage of toilet paper and common sense." Of course that's not all that went missing- we couldn't get hand sanitizer or sanitizing wipes (which are still hard to find), and we struggled to find any pasta, beans, yeast and flour, among other things. We saw what scarcity can look like. I wonder if looking at all those empty grocery shelves felt a bit like what the disciples felt as they looked out over the crowd of thousands with just 5 loaves and two fish in hand.

But of course, this pandemic has brought much worse forms of scarcity to us...for some that scarcity is financial...a lack of money, job, or housing. For others, being in isolation has meant a scarcity of human fellowship and sense of community and that can even translate into feeling a lack of love...as though love itself were scarce. Given all the chaos and instability around us right now many of us are feeling scarce on peace of mind too...it's hard to find peace in this midst of this storm raging all around us as a society. In this time of scarcity, maybe you feel like a member of that hungry crowd of thousands and there just isn't enough...a couple loaves and fishes are not going to suffice.

What are we to do in this time and place of the things we need and cherish?

Let's look to see what Jesus does in the face of scarcity in our story. Notice the first sentence in our reading today tells us that Jesus withdrew to a quiet place, presumably for solitude and prayer. It was out of the grounding Jesus had in his relationship with God the Father that he was able to address the needs that had been brought to him. So there Jesus was – face to face with a huge crowd – with people all in desperate need. What was Jesus' response? The text says that he was, "filled with compassion for them." This Greek word for compassion stems from the concept of being moved from the seat of love within. And notice our Psalm today begins with the phrase, "The Lord is gracious and filled with compassion." Compassion is at the heart of who God is and how God relates to us. We can find comfort in the compassion that God has for us in our need and in our scarcity.

And then as we look out into the world, as followers and imitators of Jesus, we too are called to look upon the crowds with compassion – we too are to have hearts, like Jesus, open to be moved from the seat of love.

Next we see the disciples urging Jesus to send the crowds away to go find food for themselves. I think this is often a natural response when we see a need. I know that's often my knee jerk reaction. And sometimes that may be the right response- sometimes people are already equipped and able to meet the needs they have. But not always. We can become so oppressed or lonely or starved or poor that we can't fulfill our need without help from someone else. And that's why we need compassion to be our guide- so that we can discern compassionately when our help is needed and when God wants to bless someone through us. Jesus knew that day that God wanted to bless the crowd through him.

While sending the people away was logical of the disciples in the face of scarcity, it was not motivated by compassion or faith. So instead Jesus says, "Give them something to eat." But the disciples remind him again of the scarcity problem,

“Ummm...Jesus...we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish....and have you seen the empty shelves in the grocery store?” I can just see this story in the pandemic, “Jesus we have 5 rolls of toilet paper and five thousand people need TP.” But what is Jesus’ response to this logical statement? He takes the little they have, he takes those 5 loaves and 2 fish and looks up to heaven and blesses and breaks the bread and then directs his followers to give them to the crowd. When Jesus looks up to heaven – he is looking to God and asking God to bless the scarce resources...to bless the little they have – the not-enough – and to make it enough. Jesus has faith in God’s abundance. This is why he gives so freely.

When I was Rector in St. John’s in the Portland area, our parish decided to hold a Cinco de Mayo party. We had a very active feeding program for the poor and hungry and our church signs advertised the party in big letters, “Everyone welcome!” A couple of our homeless guests asked me, “Is that sign true? Is everyone really welcome?” “Of course they are” I said and didn’t think much about it. The night of the party we had about 10 homeless guests turn up and the organizers became extremely anxious. Even I was worried that we might not have enough seating or food. But then some of our members who had RSVP’d ended up not coming for one reason or another...about 10 of them, so we had enough seats. And when the kids began to play games and hit the pinata, it was our homeless friends who were clapping and cheering them for them loudest, truly enjoying and reveling in being a part of the community. We served the food and there was plenty. Everyone had a fantastic night. As I stood back and looked out over the crowd I thought, “this is a miracle.” And yes, yes, yes, there was enough. In fact, there was an over-abundance of food...we had to send people home with left-overs.

When we are confronted with scarcity – whether it’s our scarcity or someone else’s – how might we entrust ourselves to the God of abundance? Because the God of the Bible, the God Jesus taught us to trust...is a God who can take our not enough

and turn it into more than enough. A brief phone call, a card, a smile – God can take our small little offerings and bless someone with a sense of love and community. A donation to our outreach ministries like MOM’s or Big Table can deeply bless someone in need. A prayer for someone who is struggling can bring peace and calm where there was only distress. As we live, more like Jesus, from a place of faith in God’s abundance, we can confront the scarcity in life and rejoice in the blessing of God’s abundance. My friends, with God, there is always enough – so let’s be generous...there’s enough love, enough peace, enough grace to go around for all of us.

Someone must have told this story about Jesus to a young nun, who came to her superiors with three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage in Calcutta. They tried to discourage her, saying that she could not possibly build an orphanage--or anything else for that matter--with three pennies. But Mother Teresa said, “I know. But with God and three pennies, I can do anything.” And she did.

Amen.