

One [More] Thing...

[Text - Matthew 14:13-21]

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This morning's New Testament reading begins at what may have been one of the low points of Jesus' life. He just received word that his cousin and fellow-prophet, John the Baptist, was beheaded by King Herod. Upon hearing this, Jesus withdraws by boat to an isolated spot. It's a place where he and his disciples can get away from the hectic pace of their work, and have a well-deserved opportunity to rest and to grieve their loss. However, word travels quickly, and people figure out where Jesus is headed, so by the time he arrives at his destination, a huge crowd has already gathered, seeking his attention and care.

I think at that point, I'd have been a bit *irritated* and said, "Let's get back in the boat and try someplace else!" But that's not Jesus' response. Instead, he is able to look beyond his own pain and problems, and to see the *people*. Not a large, faceless crowd; but the actual *people* in front of him - men, women, children - his sisters and brothers created in the Divine image - each with his or her own struggles, problems and pain. And because he has this ability to truly *see* people, Jesus can also have compassion for them - a tenderness that moves him to take action. In spite of his own pain and loss - or perhaps *because* of it - Jesus begins to touch those people, with compassion, peace, and wholeness. And apparently, in and through his ministry to *them*, Jesus himself finds renewal and strength - which I think is an important thing to remember: that sometimes, a good way to work through our own problems and pain, is to be sensitive and attentive to the problems and pain of those around us.

Finally, after a long day of tending to the needs of others, Jesus' disciples figure it's time to call it quits. They're tired and hungry, and concerned that all these people are also getting tired and hungry. It's well past supper time, and there are no All-You-Can-Eat Fish Fries to be found. So the disciples urge Jesus to "send the people away," in the hope that they can buy some food in the surrounding villages. But Jesus has a different idea. He says to his disciples, "They need not go away - *you* give them something to eat." And with that request, the excuses begin.

'You expect *us* to feed *them*? Come on, Jesus, there are only twelve of us, and there must be *thousands* of them - what can we do against such odds? We've only got five loaves of bread and two fish. To *buy* enough food for everyone would take a huge amount of money, which we don't have. And even if we had it, there aren't any Jerusalem Giant Eagle Stores nearby. Besides, we didn't invite these people to come here, they just showed up at our borders! It's not our fault that they didn't plan ahead; that they have such large families; that they're lazy and unemployed and looking for a free hand-out...' [O. K., maybe they didn't say all that, but it does sound vaguely familiar.]

“What are we to do with all these needy, hungry people?” That’s a question that’s been seeking a solution throughout human history; and it remains extremely relevant today. Since the end of World War II, the affliction that cripples and kills the most people in our world each year is *hunger*. More lives are lost and debilitated because of malnutrition, than heart disease, cancer, or even war itself. Malnutrition magnifies the effects of any disease, and played a role in at least *half* of last year’s 11 million worldwide infant deaths. What makes this so deplorable, is that hunger isn’t caused because of a lack of food in this world. It is caused by the way in which the food is distributed and proportioned.

As someone once said, “One-third of the world is *starving*, while another third is *dieting*.” That’s a sad commentary, but what can you or I do? I’ll tell you what I sometimes do: I simply try to not think about it. When I see those skin-and-bone children on TV, I turn the channel or turn it off. Thinking about the staggering problem of world hunger can leave us feeling immobilized and helpless, and ready to follow the suggestion of Jesus’ disciples, to simply “send the people away” and hope that they can somehow fend for themselves.

However, just as Jesus doesn’t excuse those disciples, he has no use for our excuses either. Rather than “sending the people away,” you and I are called to heed the words of Jesus: “*You* give them something to eat!” Now, these words may seem as unreasonable to us as they did to Jesus’ first disciples. Yet when Jesus tells them to give those people something to eat, the amazing thing is, they actually do it! Once they realize Jesus isn’t going to let them off the hook, they stop looking at what they’re lacking, and begin to take stock of their resources. Admittedly, it’s not much - five loaves and two fish. Not much at all, when you consider the vast number of people present. It would take a *miracle* to feed them all! And apparently, that’s precisely what takes place.

The feeding of the 5,000 is the *only* miracle of Jesus that’s recorded in all four Gospels; which makes it a difficult incident to simply ignore. It’s like we’re presented this overwhelming problem that won’t go away: feeding the hungry; *and* we’re presented with a solution that seems equally overwhelming: a miraculous multiplication of food. Which puts us in a position similar to those first disciples. We are charged to feed the hungry; but when we check-out our resources, we begin to feel deficient or useless. So perhaps, like them, the best you or I can do is simply be willing to *try*: to offer-up our seemingly meager resources; and pray that the Divine Source of Life will somehow bless and multiply our efforts.

When the disciples offer Jesus their loaves and fish, he gladly takes them, looks up to heaven, and gives thanks to God! He blesses those gifts, breaks them, and then gives them back to the disciples, so that *they* might feed the people. And according to all four Gospels, after all the people eat and are satisfied, there remain twelve baskets of leftovers - one souvenir take-home basket for each disciple!

Wouldn't it be great if things like that happened today? It'd certainly make our pot-luck dinners a lot easier. And it would certainly eliminate the problem of world hunger. The truth is, things like that can - and *do* - happen today; perhaps not as dramatically, but definitely as effectively and powerfully. Whenever you and I heed Jesus' call to "give them something to eat" - and act upon it - then the miracle begins anew.

It can start with that "One Thing" you put into our basket for the Brookside Hunger Center; or that one meal you help serve today at Bethany UCC; or one dollar a week to a Hunger Relief program. By itself, it may not seem like much - one person, helping provide the equivalent of one meal, one time a week - 50 meals a year. But imagine 100 members of Brecksville UCC doing that - that would be 5,000 meals! Now envision the 1,000+ other faith communities in this area doing the same thing; that would be 5 million meals - a rather *miraculous* phenomena! Of course you and I have no say as to whether or not others will do this, but that's really not the issue. All we can do, is to heed Jesus' call to "give them something to eat." All we can do, is to be willing to *see the people*, and to be moved with Divine compassion. All we can do, is place ourselves and our resources into Christ's loving and capable hands - to be blessed and renewed and multiplied. That's all you and I can do - yet according to Jesus, that's all that it takes to truly transform the world!