

Loaves, Fishes, and Leftovers

July 23, 2017

Matthew 14:13-21

A bunch of us here subscribe to a daily devotional that our denomination sends out by email each morning, called -- the Daily Devotional.

It's just a couple paragraphs each day, written by ministers from all over the country,

reflecting on a verse or two of scripture.

Sometimes it gives you pause,

sometimes it gives you something to chew over the rest of the day,

and sometimes it makes you smile.

Three weeks ago, July 1, the daily devotion was written by a sister in faith, a clergy woman up in New Hampshire,

and her opening line was this:

"I would rather write five sermons than lead the children's message at church."

And then she went on:

"Okay, that's not really true, but I can honestly say that I would have a lot less *anxiety* over five sermons than one children's message."

And I can guarantee you this:

every single pastor reading that devotion said "uh-huh! oh yeah. I feel you."

Because the truth is, you never know how a children's message is going to go.

With a sermon, like this kind of sermon, like, from a pulpit,

you've got some scripture that inspires you,

you've got some ideas you want to share,

you've got maybe a story or two that you think will help make your point --

and then you write it, and it's here, and you say it,

and you all are kind enough to sit there and listen and maybe nod a little,

and if what I'm saying is completely boring you, you are all nice enough to fake it.

But a kid's sermon?

You just don't know what's going to happen.

Back in Advent, last December, I talked about how Jesus came at Christmas to show us how God really wants the world to be.

And I asked the kids to tell me what God's world would look like.

I was going for world peace, clean air, justice for all.

They came up with unicorns, free pizza, and marshmallows raining from the sky.

Which probably would create world peace, actually.

Or more recently, when I brought out a ladder and talked about the dream that Jacob dreamed, about a ladder with angels on it.

I lost control of that so quick -- it turned into kids swapping stories about scary monster dreams, and that horrible dream where you feel like you're falling and falling.

David dubbed that one the Alfred Hitchcock of children's messages.

Which is why so many ministers, me included, always love to do the Loaves and Fishes children's message.

I have no idea how ministers taught this scripture before Pepperidge Farm invented goldfish crackers,

but let me tell you, no minister *since* has told the story without them.

As you witnessed today.

It's awesome.

No scratching your head trying to come up with props, no hauling in a ladder or a tomato plant or a bicycle or any of the myriad things I've done --

all you need is lots and lots of cheesy cracker goodness

in the shape of those wonderful little fish, and you are set.

Fish for 5,000 people? There it is.

You get to tell the story of Jesus' coolest miracle AND everyone gets snacks.

It **is** Jesus' coolest miracle.

It's the only miracle story that makes it into all four of the gospels.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they all have lots of different stories about Jesus to share, but this one, this one they all four want you to know about.

And over this past year, I've thought a lot about why that is.

Why, of all the stories that could be told about the things Jesus did, this is the one that all those gospel writers really really want you to know about.

And the secret is that --it's not really all about the fish.

I know there are a lot of goldfish cracker crumbs up here to say otherwise, but the truth is, it's not really all the miraculously multiplying food.

It's about the people who needed that food, and I don't just mean all those thousands of people whose tummies were rumbling.

I mean the disciples. Jesus' friends.

Think about what happens in this story right *before* the miracle.

It's a really uncomfortable scene.

There are hundreds, thousands, of people who have gathered to hear Jesus, and this is not some organized speaker's forum, this is not a planned rally, this is a gazillion people who heard where Jesus was that day, and flocked to see him.

And now they're thirsty and they're hungry, and you know how you get when you're hungry,

and so they start asking Jesus' disciples "what have you got for food around here?" and "hey, my kids need something to drink, where can we go?"

And Jesus' disciples, all they can say is "so sorry, we didn't see this coming, no one placed the catering order, we got nothing."

And honestly, it's getting maybe even a little scary.

So that's when the disciples go to Jesus, and they say, "um, it's getting a little tense out here, people want stuff, we don't have it, so, Jesus"

-- and this is a direct quote from the scripture story --

"please send them away."

That's what the disciples said. "Please, Jesus, please send all these people away."

Which doesn't seem unreasonable, frankly.

It's what Jesus says back that seems unreasonable.

He says to his disciples, his friends, he says "I'm not sending them away.

YOU feed them."

Whaaaaaat? say the disciples.

We barely have enough food in our backpacks for ourselves.

And Jesus says,

give me what you have. We'll make it work.

And then comes the miracle.

Then comes the amazing moment when Jesus takes the little food that his friends have

and somehow makes it enough.

Somehow makes it enough to serve thousands of people.

It's a pretty cool story.

And yes, it's known as the loaves and fishes story,

the feeding of the five thousand people story,

but I truly think that what's most important about this story is what happens to those disciples, Jesus' disciples.

The miracle is not so much that five thousand people get fed.

The miracle is that Jesus gives those disciples enough to feed those five thousand people.

He takes what little they have, and he makes it enough.

I need you to feed those people, Jesus said,

and look, I'll give you enough so you can.

I'll make sure you have enough.

Truth is that Jesus did this all the time.

Not the bread and fish trick, that seems to have been a one and done thing.

But I mean that over and over again in the Bible,
Jesus takes whatever little people have,
and makes it enough.

You feel like your faith is the size of a mustard seed? he said. It's okay -- I'll
make it enough.

He took people where they were, with what they had,
and he made it enough. It's what he did.

Each year on our Appalachia Service trip,
there is a moment when all of us are gathered together in worship.
Sunday morning, the day after we've left Fairfield,
we all wake up in the dorms of Roanoke College,
and roll ourselves out of bed and gather out on the quad
to be in worship together.

It's the only time that every single person on the trip is together at the same time,
before we split up into groups and head off to different counties in West Virginia.
So it's my only chance to tell all of them how proud I am of them --
and to offer some thoughts on what God is up to with them.

This year, the scripture I shared on the morning of July 2nd was this scripture,
the loaves and fishes.

And I told them that I knew that many of them were wondering where they had
enough for the hard week of service ahead.

I said I knew that they were wondering whether they had enough faith, enough
compassion, enough patience.

Wondering whether they had the skills they'd need to help the Appalachian
families, or the ability to learn.

And I said that what I wanted them to remember
was that when Jesus' disciples were overwhelmed by the task in front of them,
Jesus gave them what they needed.

When they were convinced that what they had wasn't sufficient,
Jesus took that little they had and made it enough.

I want you to know, I said to those teens and adults,

that whatever you have brought on this trip, God will make it enough.
Whatever bit of faith, and kindness, and hope,
whatever willingness to be of service,
Jesus will bless it and will make it enough.

And he did.

All week long, as I went from work site to work site,
I saw kids who I *knew* had been uncertain
tackling things they didn't believe they could manage --
the kid who told me that he'd never held a hammer before
was studding out a new wall;
the one who was nervous about being far from home
was laughing happily with friends.

More than that, though --

there was the shy one who was sitting on a porch with her Appalachian family,
just talking away;

there was the adult leader who'd told me he wasn't too sure at all about his faith,
and there he was offering the morning prayers.

Whatever any of them brought, Jesus made it enough.

God made it enough.

Those 300 teens and adults --

they fed others with their love and compassion and hard work,

they fed because they had themselves been fed --

they had enough to give because God took what they had,
blessed it, and made it enough.

But it's what God does for all of us, you know.

Not just those who hop on buses bound for Appalachia.

God can take whatever we have --

whatever faith, whatever compassion, whatever hope --
and make it enough.

And that's really, really important to remember.

Because there are days when you can feel like one of those overwhelmed disciples.

I am tapped out, you think.

I don't have enough.

I don't have enough faith for this,

I'm running dry on compassion;

I don't have enough hope.

And in those moments, Jesus says,
well, what do you have? Let me see.

'Cause I can make it enough.

I can make it enough.

I'm going to close by telling you about someone who was a very, very special part of this year's Appalachia trip for me.

Steve Adams was part of my first trip to Appalachia in 1990 --

he organized the vans we needed to rent, he lined up a place for us to stay along the way -- back then, it was a couple Sunday school rooms in a Roanoke church, now it's Roanoke College.

So he was my logistics savior, since I was 26 years old and had never run a service trip.

But he also helped me understand that leading the trip wasn't just about organizing vans;

that God was going to be at work among us, and that I needed to watch for that, "Expect miracles," he said -- and that phrase became the watchword for our trip from then on.

This year, after not having seen Steve in 27 years, I got a call from him -- he was coming back on the trip.

Now 75 years old, he drove up from Texas to join us in West Virginia, and a whole new generation of people witnessed God's spirit in him as I had done.

And all week long, Steve and I talked about this scripture, this scripture about loaves and fishes

and those disciples who found that God had given them enough to serve.

On the last morning of the trip.

early morning, as we packed up to leave,

Steve came to find me.

"You left out part of the story," he said. "I've been thinking about it all night."

I didn't know what he meant.

"The story," he said, "the loaves, and the fishes, and God giving the disciples enough to feed everybody. You left out the last part of the story."

I was still puzzled.

"Think," said Steve, "what's the last sentence of the story?"

And it dawned on me.

"It says there were leftovers," I said. "It says that after the disciples fed everyone there, they went around and picked up what was left. And there were twelve baskets full."

And Steve grinned.

"That's it," he said. "There were leftovers. And you know what that means. God doesn't just give us enough. God gives us *more than enough*."

Not just enough -- but more than enough.

May the God of abundant love bless each one of us this week

so that we may know to ask for what we need,

give thanks for the blessing of receiving enough,

and rejoice in the leftovers: the *more than enough* that overflows our lives.

Amen.

