

You Give Them Something to Eat: Matthew 14:13-21

Norwalk Christian Church, August 3, 2014, Year A, Proper 13

If we were making a list of all the hurt in the world, all the suffering...where would we begin? Would we look at recent events? Violence between Israel and Gaza? Or in the Crimea Peninsula? A terrifying Ebola outbreak in Western Africa, and a U.S. doctor and nurse whose lives hangs in the balance, along with hundreds more Africans? Suffering and violence throughout Central America, that's forcing children to leave their homes to travel north, in hopes of safety?

That's the news this week. But this week is one more week, in a decade of bad news. What about the countless still suffering from the 2004 Tsunami in Thailand, or the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti, and subsequent health and hunger crisis? Or the 2011 earthquake in Japan. And then there's those in our own country, still recovering from tornadoes and hurricanes, from recession and a housing crisis, not to mention those who continue to suffer day after day as they try to make ends meet, pay the bills, and find adequate medical care and work.

So much suffering. So much need. It's enough to paralyze us with inaction. What can we, a small church, in a bedroom community in central Iowa, do to impact the suffering around the world? Where would we even start?

I can't help but think that Jesus feels this way in our text this morning, overcome by so much need and suffering. Everywhere he goes, people are bring their needs to him. The story we just read comes on the heels of devastating news. Verse 1 says, "Now when they heard this..." The "*this*" referred to is the news of the death of John the Baptist. John, the cousin of Jesus, the one who prepared the people for the ministry of Jesus, has been brutally murdered by the puppet-king, King Herod. The news is almost too much for Jesus to bear, so he gets into a boat to get away to a deserted place.

But he can't get away. The multitudes, many who were disciples of John devastated from the news, find a shortcut to the other side of the lake where Jesus is headed. They're hurting, and they need Jesus to bring hope in the midst of this hurt. When Jesus gets off the boat, his deserted place is filled with thousands upon thousands of people that he was trying to avoid. So much pain. So much suffering.

Instead of sending them home so he can have his alone time, Jesus ministers to them all, all day. But even that is not enough; there is always more to do. When it gets to be late, the disciples come to Jesus and suggest he send everyone home. It's late, and they're hungry, and they are in the middle of no where. "Send the crowds away," and they can maybe find some dinner on their own, and Jesus and the Disciples can get their needed rest.

When presented with one more need on top of all that the people had already brought him, Jesus could've said that was it. We've done enough for these people. Send them away, let's get some rest, and head to another town. No one would've blamed him. Everyone would've thanked him.

But that's not what Jesus did. Instead, he said, "Don't send them away. You give them something to eat."

What are they going to do? So much need, and they have no resources. The disciples of Jesus have left everything to follow Jesus. They're just as hungry as the people. How are they to feed the multitudes? When they gather up the food they have, all they can find is five loaves of bread and two fish.

And Jesus says, "That is enough. Bring what you have to me."

Then he takes the bread and fish into his hands, and in a scene straight from the communion table, he blesses and breaks the loaves, gives them to the disciples, who hands them out to the people, and the multitudes are fed. When everyone is full, they gather up the leftovers, and there are 12 baskets full. 5,000 men, plus at least as many women and children—10-15 thousand people, more than the population of Norwalk, fed with plenty left over, and all they had was 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish!

Now, I've seen a lot of people fed at this church with a plate of Carolyn Hukle's cookies, but cookies enough to feed the entire population of Norwalk, and then some?! Now that would be impressive. Would that we had the ability of Jesus to bless the multitudes!

As it is, it doesn't seem like we can do that much, especially when faced with all that there is to do in the world. After all, we aren't the largest church in town. We've been right here, in this very spot, since 1869--before there ever was a Norwalk--yet people still ask, "Now, where is your church located?" We make budget, but what could we do if we had more resources? What if we had more people, pews in both services filled to capacity? Then we could do some amazing things! But as it is, what can we, Norwalk Christian Church, do with the little we have?

Well, we can take comfort, because some Biblical scholars have suggested that what happened in this story was really not a miracle at all. According to them, Jesus didn't *really* miraculously multiply 5 loaves of bread into thousands. Instead, this is a miracle of generosity. As the few loaves were shared, people began to feel guilty. Tucked away in their bags, they had their own bread, which they had kept safely tucked away for themselves. But as they saw the generosity of others, they were moved to compassion, and shared their bread. Once everyone began sharing what they had with someone else, there was plenty for all, and then some. So, this story is about nothing miraculous; it's just about sharing.

Sometimes Biblical scholars take all the fun out of the Bible.

And yet, if we could get thousands of people to start sharing what they had with those who were in need, I'd probably call that miraculous, too. It's one thing to transform 5 loaves into thousands. It's another thing to transform greedy hearts into hearts filled with compassion.

This past week, Marti and I had the great privilege of being with our CYF students on their Mission Trip to Minneapolis. What a great group of youth we have! You will hear more about our trip next Sunday, but let me say now...it was perhaps one of the most extraordinary, ordinary weeks I've had.

Let me explain. On this mission, we didn't do anything incredibly fancy. There were no grand gestures or huge risks. Just a week of a lot of ordinary actions.

Ordinary things, like pulling weeds at a Men's Mission, as we helped one of the residents catch up on his work, so he could focus on his education and recovery. Ordinary things, like filling bags with rice, vegetables, and vitamins that would be shipped to Haiti to feed starving children. Ordinary things like working in an assembly line, packing boxes of produce and frozen meat to be shared at food banks around the region. Ordinary things, like cleaning up the grounds and sorting and tagging clothes for a ministry that provides free professional clothing for men looking for work.

We learned that in order to accomplish the task at hand, we had to each play our role. And if we did, then together we could accomplish so much more. Our small, ordinary actions, placed into the hands of Christ, were multiplied into something extraordinary. These small actions made possible the greater work of the ministries we served, multiplying our actions into food and opportunity for literally thousands of people around the world.

As we sat in a room at the Emergency Foodshelf Network, waiting to receive our instructions, we saw on one of the tables a card with a saying. It was from the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, who wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Faced with the needs of our world, faced with a growing community, hungry for hope, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat!" He's not asking us to perform a miracle. But he is asking us to look within ourselves, to see what resources we have among us, what is already here, what assets do we, as a church, have right now that could be placed in Christ's hands to be multiplied into a blessing for our world.

We have a lot of talented people here. We have some great cooks, and a church that loves to eat. I wonder how Jesus might take this gift and transform it into a blessing for the multitudes?

We have some gardeners, and some weavers, and seamstresses and crafters. We have some handy men and women, some classic car experts, some cyclists, and kayakers and hunters and fishers. We have some accountants, and teachers, and service employees, and musicians, and engineers.

We have retired people with time and energy to spend on service to our community. We have teenagers, filled with compassion and talent, who interact every day with other teens from around Norwalk. We have young families with children on sports teams, and in play groups, and in scouts. I wonder how Jesus might take these talented people and bless the multitudes?

We have a building that's long paid for, with room to grow. We have two nurseries. Several meeting rooms. A basement with space-a-plenty. We have a piece of property at the heart of Norwalk. We have a large empty lot right next to us, green, full and ready for something. I wonder how Jesus might take these wonderful resources and bless the multitudes.

We are a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That means we have freedom. Freedom of belief. Freedom to imagine new things. Freedom to welcome all. In a time when churches are known for what they are against, for who they do not accept, we are a church that welcomes all to Christ's table, as Christ has welcomed us. I wonder how Jesus might take a church like ours, with a message of welcome like ours, and use it to bless the multitudes of Norwalk?

Don't send them away, Jesus says. Take what you have, and YOU give them something to eat!

Well, we can do that.

And so we take what we have. Our gifts, our talents, our resources, our message...we take what we have, and we place it in Jesus' hands. And Christ blesses our gift and multiplies what we have shared so that it can feed the multitudes.

Let us pray:

Our God, we don't have much, but all that we have, we give to you. Use us in simple, yet powerful ways, to bring hope, justice, and unconditional love to this community. Amen.

As we prepare to come to Christ Table of Welcome, let us sing a new song, the words are inserted into your bulletin. If you need the music, we will sing it to the tune of #453.

Invitation/Benediction:

In the next few weeks, you will have two opportunities to respond to Christ's call to "Give them something to eat."

On August 23 is the Disciples Leadership Conference. This is going to be a great event of preparation for ministry. There are events for all ages, and free child care. Registration is \$20, which includes your meal, and if you need a scholarship, we got as many scholarships as are needed. This event is about training, training us to answer Jesus' call to "Give them something to eat.." We will look at the changes facing churches today, and how we, as Disciples, can respond in faithful ways to what God is doing in our world today. Marti and I really want to see record numbers from Norwalk Christian Church there. We want our region to know that we are here and ready to serve our community.

Opportunity number 2 is our Church Ministry Fair on September 7th. If you're the leader of a ministry in our church, you probably already received an email from Marti last week. Maybe you read about it in our August Newsletter. This is the chance for leaders of ministries to tell the story of what they do, and for all of us to learn more about your church, about all we do to serve this community and how you can better use your gifts in our church.

Beautiful people of God, we have so much to share. Gifts, talents, resources. Let us take what we have, place it into the hands of Jesus, as Christ multiplies our gifts to share with the world.

Please stand now, as we a song I do not know, but after I read the words, I knew we had to sing it. So, I hope someone knows it. Let us sing # 413: Take our Bread.

Pastoral Prayer

Compassionate God, you are good to all. Help us to trust in you and to share what we have with a hungry world.

We pray today for your gift of this earth, and all the creatures who look to you for their food in due season. May we do our part in restoring the balance of your creation and deepen our commitment to follow Jesus in ministries that feed and serve others. Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

We pray for all the people of the world, for their ethnic groups, nations, and leaders, that wars will cease, that the hungry will be fed, and that refugees will return home in safety and peace. Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

We pray for all those who suffer from physical ills and for all those who wrestle with you for personal identity and spiritual peace. May they find their truth without money and peace without cost. Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

Today, we especially pray for: _____.

Gracious and merciful God, abounding in steadfast love, we join our voices with all that you have made in speaking your praises and blessing your name for you are just in all your ways and kind in all your doings. In the name of Jesus we pray, who lives and reigns with you and with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, Amen.