

Sermon – The Miracle of Giving  
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 55:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21  
Sunday, August 3, 2014  
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Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 55:1-5. Scarcity is an engine that drives profits. When greed accelerates scarcity (by buying up all of a commodity so it can be hoarded), the rich abundance of God's creation is seriously perverted. This sin against the order of creation is most acute when food, the staff of life, is involved...and people starve. The prophet Isaiah describes a different organizing principle for life together in God's kingdom. Listen for the Word of God from the prophet Isaiah.

*1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.*

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when we dwell on all that's wrong in our world. We say, "What's the use of trying? My little contribution won't even make a dent." When Jesus was faced with human suffering he healed people one at a time and when confronted with the crowd's hunger he doesn't limit his thinking to what could reasonably be done. He simply challenges his disciples, us, give them food to eat. Listen to the Word of God in Matthew 14:13-21.

*13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

The title of the sermon: *The Miracle of Giving*

The text: *“Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they ate and were filled.” Matthew 14:19b-20a*

Let us pray: Gracious God, as words are spoken and heard, we pray that your Spirit will work in our hearts, so that your Word will be heard and our lives will come closer to what you want us to do and be. We pray in Christ. Amen.

Did you notice something familiar about the way Jesus handled the loaves and fish? It's the same words Jesus used at the Last Supper, that we repeat at Communion: “And Jesus takes the bread; blesses it; breaks it; and then gives it away.” Some say that by the time the Gospels were written, the writers noticed that, in almost every instance, when Jesus ate with others or used food as an object lesson for parables, it had a ‘sacramental’ tone to it.

Why were Jesus’ contemporaries so slow to see what is so obvious to us? Let’s look more closely at the characters (besides Jesus) who were the main actors in this miracle. What motives can we see in their behaviors? What can we learn?

The disciples come across as (1) tired, (2) maybe protective of Jesus (because he was tired and had tried to withdraw to refresh his spirit), and (3) even a little stingy. When Jesus challenges them to feed the crowds, they protest: “What!? All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish. (That’s barely enough for us, let alone...)” They did not have a clue (or enough faith) that God’s love was sufficient for their needs?

The crowds come across a little better. They are truly hanging onto every word Jesus shares. When Jesus takes a boat to go across the lake (so he can be alone for a spell), they follow on foot, and continue to hound him,...and beg for their sick to be healed. So Jesus has compassion on them and heals them... and ultimately feeds them.

In John’s version of the feeding of 5,000, Jesus again tries to get away by himself, and again the crowds follow, and this time he chastises them: “You’ve come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions, but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free!”

The real hero of the story, unnamed and not even mentioned in Matthew’s version of this miracle (which is reported in all four gospels) is the boy who came forward and gave up his lunch for everyone else. And the real miracle is what God can do (when everyone else says ‘it is hopeless’) when we give, humbly, and unselfishly, asking only that God bless our gifts.

I hesitate to share the following story because my life has not been that exemplary. But I am emboldened by the example of biblical ‘heroes’, many of which were not nice people. But in spite of their failings, God was able to use their receptiveness to advance God’s kingdom.

The story begins when I was finishing up high school and thinking of going to college. My folks made a bargain with me—if I worked and earned enough for ½ of my expense—they would come up with the other ½. So in January of my high school senior year, I applied for a summer job at the local canning factory, and I was accepted as soon as school got out. I worked all summer, stacking boxes and running a hydraulic press on alternate ½ hours. And by the end of

summer I had earned over \$1,000, (enough for my 1<sup>st</sup> year of college...with my parents' contribution).

Things went a little differently the next year. I heard rumors there had been a drought and the crops would not be as good and the factory would not employ as many workers. I applied anyway in January again, and to my relief, even though they were going to 'single shift' that summer—I was rehired, because I was experienced. Some days we did not work at all. But as the pack wore on, we got some serious overtime. And then one day I showed up for work, and my foreman greeted me with the news, my partner (that I traded off every ½ hour with) had injured his hand—I would have to stack cases (24 lb., one every 2 seconds) without relief (except breaks and meals) until quitting time. I had no idea, when I accepted the challenge (tough teenager that I was) quitting time was 18 hours away!

Have you heard, 'Necessity is the mother of invention'? and my corollary is 'Laziness is its Father'. As the afternoon wore into evening I made a stool out of two cases, strategically placed where the cases came off the rollers to me. I could slide the cases across my knees and swing most of them to their place on pallet without having to bend over, pick them up, and put them down. Instead of being completely wore out, I completed the night with a sense of satisfaction.

The next morning my same foreman met me where we checked in. In so many words he said, "Since you were able to change back-breaking work into a sit-down job, we've found a sit-down job for you—would you like to run a labeling machine? Well, I had no idea how many head-aches that machine could be, but that's another story. With the extra pay, and the extra time it took to set up in the morning and the extra time it took to clean up each night, I ended up with twice the money I had the previous summer!

So when I returned to college, I did some soul-searching. I wasn't anxious to go back to the canning factory again, if I didn't need to. And then I went on a weekend mission trip to a nearby city. So the idea jelled—why not give the next summer to God, by participating in an extended mission trip?

I explored options (international ones were too expensive) and decided to sign up for the one in New Mexico—building a church out of adobe. I could bicycle from college in Iowa to N.M. the first ½ of June, work the second ½, and still have the remainder of the summer. There were not a few adventures and there were times I wondered why I got into this, but all in all I had a wonderful, satisfying experience. I even met a young man who needed someone to ride with him back to Omaha, in July, and someone from the first group was willing to take my bicycle back to college for me, so I didn't have to bicycle home.

But some strange things happened when I returned home. After the 4<sup>th</sup> of July I decided to go out and see how the old factory was going—getting back to work in the middle of the summer was not my intention. But my old foreman spotted me across the warehouse and ran over to me, "If you're willing to work—we need you to train other label operators starting tomorrow!" I already had enough money, but he acted like he really needed me. So I went back to work. And then the strangest thing of all: I got a letter from the president of my college. I was almost afraid to open it. Inside, on very official looking stationery, he said 'You have been nominated

and endorsed for a "Bishop Staffoker–full tuition Scholarship!"...that I didn't even know about and certainly had not applied for...

I had tried to give the summer to God. But I learned, "You cannot out-give God." I ended up with 3 times as much money for college as I started with.

We can't explain how Jesus was able to feed 5,000 people, when a boy gave up his lunch, but I do know, God is able to multiply our gifts

- (1) when we give humbly and unselfishly
- (2) asking only that God bless them for God's use.

Amen.