

“If Not Us, Who?”

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Matthew 14:13-21

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The first Sunday after a minister has been on vacation and has returned is usually a good time to be in worship. Hopefully, there has been some rest and relaxation and the minister is renewed. Maybe he's had some opportunity to do some reading. You're fortunate to be here today. The other side of that coin is if the minister rushes back from vacation, gets back and is all worn out and exhausted. It might not be such a good Sunday to be in worship.

I will let you know that we got back from vacation, or at least from traveling, about a week ago. I am well rested, relaxed and renewed. We had a wonderful time. I hesitate to tell you this, but the morning we left Colorado, the temperature was 58 degrees. They were actually having a heat wave at Estes Park. The temperature would get in the low 80s during the day. It was tough duty.

While we were there, Suzanne noticed that the local television station reported a bear had been sighted. I guess they want to let the tourists know to be prepared in case they meet a bear. I don't know what that helps. I would love to be able to tell you that this bear was about to attack a child, I intervened, save the child's life . . . none of that happened. The bear was sighted, but as far as I know it went back up into the forest and no one was hurt.

It is good to be back and it was good to be away. That's one reason it's good to be back, because of the opportunity to be away. Our scripture, coincidentally, is about going away. If you hear those first words of the scripture, when Jesus heard the news that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been killed by King Herod, he went away. He wanted some time alone.

First lesson from the scripture: You have heard it said before that if Jesus needed to pray, we need to pray. The same is true if Jesus needed to get away, so surely do we need to get away. It might mean going to the mountains in Colorado; it might mean coming into this sanctuary to get away from the day-to-day routine of life. We do something here this morning we don't do any other time of the week. We come to worship—to get away from the cares of the world. First lesson—we all need time away. We need some time for ourselves, some time to be alone, some time to be alone with God.

You're familiar with this story. It is a favorite of the gospel writers. It is one of the few stories that is told in all four gospels. It is what I call the church's first fellowship dinner. In one form or another, this story, the feeding of the 5000, is told in all four gospels. The circumstances are a little bit different, but the story is

basically the same. You remember what happened—it is growing late, the disciples come to Jesus and say the crowd is growing hungry. “We need to send them away so they can go buy some food.” Not an unreasonable request. But Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.”

You know how the story goes, but what happens next we don’t know exactly. It was a miracle. There’s no doubt about that. It wouldn’t be that hard to believe that Jesus could take 5 loaves and two fish and multiply it to feed a crowd, would it? Think about this. We’re talking about the one who invented fish. The one who invented fish could surely multiply fish. The one who invented wheat or barley, or whatever was used to make the bread, could surely multiply the loaves. I think perhaps even a greater miracle happened. The disciples had perhaps five loaves and two fish. It is John’s gospel that says a young boy, a lad, had the five loaves and two fish. Is it possible that nearly everyone who was present had some kind of food—maybe for their family and themselves, and when they were inspired by Jesus, they were inspired to share the food they had? Would that be a miracle?

Please turn in your hymnal to page 464. Look at the 3rd verse:

*Cure thy children’s warring madness;
bend our pride to thy control;
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,*

What a strange phrase: *Wanton, selfish gladness*. *Wanton* can mean “wasteful extravagance to the point of wastefulness.” *Wanton* can also mean “inhumane.” *Selfish gladness* is about as far away as you can get from the joy of Christ. Why are we wantonly, selfishly glad? Because we are rich in things and poor in soul. Have you ever heard of a better description for our culture today? Rich in things but poor in soul.

There is good news. We can be inspired to move beyond our wanton, selfish gladness to come here, concerned only about ourselves, to see beyond ourselves to learn to share to meet the needs of others. I know some of you come here facing tough battles. But hear this. The same one who performed a miracle to feed not 5,000 people, but 5,000 men *plus* women and children—maybe 15,000 or 20,000, that one can perform a miracle in your life.

While we were gone on vacation, I spent no small amount of time thinking and praying about our “We Would Be Building” campaign. It seems almost impossible to try to raise money during these tough economic times. You can’t turn on your television or pick up a newspaper without hearing how bad the economy is. Learn this lesson from this story and a similar story in the very next chapter. In the 15th chapter of Matthew, Jesus is again with a large crowd late at night and the disciples are concerned because they do not have enough bread to share. Surely Jesus thought of those disciples: “Will you ever learn?” The living Christ thinks of us “Will you ever learn what I can do through you when you share?”

I mentioned earlier something about reading while I was on vacation. I don't know how many of you have heard of this little book called "The Shack." It would be an excellent book for a cell group to study. There are all kinds of things to discuss. I read that book while we were on vacation. It is a story of a man named Mackenzie who faced a tragedy in his life. He goes to this shack, not sure who he is going to meet. He meets God in the shack and while he is there he is talking with Jesus. Mackenzie is down on the church. He says, "I don't have a lot of use for the church." Jesus says to Mackenzie, "I did not come to build an institution. I came to build people's lives, a living, breathing community of those who love me."

As we face the daunting prospect of raising money for a capital campaign during tough, economic times, we need to remember the miraculous story of how Jesus is able to multiply what we share. There is also this important truth of the story. If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you heard Bill Tabbernee preach about the story of Lazarus and Dives—a rich man did not share food with the poor man just outside his gate. The lesson of that story is the kingdom of God is not present where that happens.

We see just the opposite happening in this story. This is an end-time story, an end-of-the-world story, but look at the difference in the kind of end-of-the world story that Jesus tells and most of those stories we read today. No one is left behind! All of God's children are fed.

Something else is happening in this story. Did you notice it? Matthew says that Jesus took the loaves and blessed them and broke them. Do you recognize that language? What happened at the last supper? What happens at this table every Sunday? There are some who have criticized the church for feeding the poor. "We need to do something more than just feed the poor. We need to feed them spiritually also." This story faces the question in this way: is this a story of the Lord's Supper or is it just supper? The One who makes all of life sacred says "Is this the Lord's Supper, or just supper?" Yes.

In a world that is hungry, some hungry because they haven't had anything to eat all day, many many more, perhaps, hungry for the Living Christ in their lives even if they don't realize that empty place, the living Christ says to us, "You give them something." "You give them something." Amen