

“Practicing Our Faith: Bring What You Have”

Mark 6:34-44

August 29, 2021

Whenever I read scripture passages about that great heavenly banquet, or whenever I stand behind this table and recite the Lord’s Supper liturgy, calling this meal the welcome feast of the children of God, my mind takes me back to a grassy lawn on Woodleaf Barber Road where metal folding chairs surround tables set with paper tablecloths and plasticware. In my mind, I’m maybe seven years old and therefore free to roam the grounds surrounding the Unity Presbyterian Church as a group of older women begin to pull plastic wrap from platters and trays filled with incredible food. As soon as the worship service ends, people begin streaming out of the sanctuary for this dinner on the grounds, a great tradition that defines the life of a faith community that shaped mine. Now, the total human population of Woodleaf, North Carolina couldn’t have reached four digits in those days and was likely outnumbered by cows and chickens. But in the eyes of the seven-year-old pastor’s son, many thousands streamed out of worship, forming a sea of people who begin to line up, plates in hand. The tradition is that the children go after the elderly members, but that’s okay because my sights are set on the dessert table. Pound cake, plates of chocolate chip cookies, cupcakes, layered parfaits, and brownies—all homemade, all stacked high. Still, anxiety and worry rise as people ahead of me begin to deplete the supply. In my mind, I’m keeping count of how many are left, and I’m concerned. No need. This is a church potluck. There is always enough. Baskets full of leftovers will come home with us to the manse just down the hill. Even in a family of six, the supply of cookies will last us all week long.

I think there’s a reason why those potluck lunches and the images of heavenly feasts hang together in my mind. Scripture is filled with stories of God’s

extravagant provision. We read of divine abundance at times and in places where scarcity was the human assumption. We read about manna and quail in the wilderness. We read about fresh drinking water flowing from rocks in the desert. We read about the widow’s last jar of oil replenished when Elijah visits. We hear of wine from water at the wedding feast, and bread broken and wine poured out in hopeful anticipation even on a night of betrayal and arrest. The stories of God’s abundant provision are dotted throughout the words of Holy Scripture.

This morning’s story is a case in point for how widespread these accounts of abundance are in the earliest Christian communities. This story is told in all four of the gospels, *twice* in Matthew and in Mark. The story echoes the powerful theme beautifully: God provides. God provides abundance among those who assume scarcity. The multiplying of loaves of bread and fish to feed thousands of hungry people might just be the most recognizable of Jesus’ miracles in the New Testament. We teach it to our children of all ages. We remember and repeat it for the astounding extravagance and visual quality. We can picture that crowd of thousands gathered on a hillside to hear Jesus preach. We can see those meager portions of bread and fish. And then we can watch. Like that line at the church potluck, we can watch as baskets are passed for hours and never depleted.

As we complete our August sermon series on the practices that shape the lives of Jesus’ followers, the feeding of the five thousand might seem like an odd choice. After all, you have to admit, the original disciples don’t come out of it looking very good. The story turns on the actions of Jesus, and the miracle seems to take place in spite of the disciples’ obstinate

resistance. And yet, I'm convinced Mark included this story (twice!) as a teaching tool for those who want to follow Jesus, for those who want to practice their faith. I wonder if perhaps we miss the message if we leave the spotlight solely on Jesus and neglect the crowd. What I see commended here is the practice of bringing what you have.

The disciples have the first line in the scene. They look at Jesus, they look at the crowd of hungry people, and they come to a simple, even obvious, conclusion. This is, the disciples say, a deserted place (literally, in Greek, a desert), and it is getting late. Then they suggest, or perhaps even demand, that Jesus send this crowd of hungry people away to buy their own dinner. The disciples aren't dumb. They know that a hungry crowd is not the ideal audience and that things could take a turn for the worse quickly as the sun goes down. Send them away, Jesus. We didn't plan for a meal. The event is over.

Jesus speaks next. He speaks only one sentence. It's actually four words in Greek. "You give them something to eat." No elaboration. No explanation. "You give them something to eat."

Well, you know how the story goes from there. First the disciples ask a *biting* question: *Hey, Jesus, do you happen to have a few thousand dollars on you?* Jesus asks them to bring whatever they can find. The measly amount they come up with becomes enough to feed the whole crowd. Yes, it is another entry in the long line of stories of abundance and provision.

But there is one detail in the passage that even careful and attentive listeners—like all of you—may have missed this morning. The gospel writer says that Jesus ordered the crowds to sit down, and he tells them where. A quick aside to say that Mark is not gratuitous with words. Mark's gospel is linguistically lean. Words aren't wasted, but here he adds a detail. Have the crowd sit down. Where? On the green grass. Remember the disciples said, "This is a desert. There's no food here." Jesus says, "Hey, guys, have them sit on that green grass over there. Take a look at what you have." Let me humbly suggest this morning

that abundance is a matter of perspective. That abundance is a matter of vision. That abundance is a matter of faith. That abundance is about bringing what you have to Jesus and trusting that it will be enough. By God's grace it will be enough.

You give them something to eat. Not a harsh command but an invitation to consider the possibility of abundance. And so maybe the disciples begin to look in their pockets and in their bags. And maybe others in the crowd do the same, coming up with meager portions of food that can be shared with others. And maybe by God's power, the meal is multiplied. And maybe it's a miracle, an arrow pointing toward the abundance that God provides.

Listen, when you see the green grass and not the barren desert, it changes the way you think. When you recognize that what you already have can be used by God, it changes the way you live. When you believe that God has provided more than enough, it changes the way you respond to the needs of neighbors and the hunger of the world. When you trust abundance, it changes the way you practice the faith. As that great poet, dreamer, and prophet Isaiah proclaimed, if you have the right perspective, you will see waters break forth in the wilderness. You'll see streams flowing in the desert. Friends, that vision of what is possible is your first step toward changing what is broken.

If we are going to be those who follow Jesus... *Follow* Jesus, not admire him from a distance. *Follow* Jesus, not appreciate his sterling example of virtue. *Follow* Jesus, not reflect on his wise and insightful teaching. *Follow* Jesus. We are going to need to bring what we have to Jesus. We're going to need to offer ourselves completely to his work in the world. Friends, with God's blessing, it will always be enough. You are not called to offer more than you have, but neither are you free to withhold what God has graciously provided, what God requires us to invest in faithful practice.

Here's a miracle: When each of us brings what we have, the gifts and the talents and the time and the commitment and the passion and the power and the enthusiasm and the energy are all multiplied. For

you have something I will never have. Each of us has something unique and concrete to contribute. The miracle, it turns out, takes every single one of us.

That's how a church fulfills its mission. No one can provide everything, and no one is extraneous. Everything we do requires all of us. Whether you swing hammers, teach children, pack bags, answer phones, organize events, knit shawls, prepare food, sing boldly, give resources, pray diligently, attend worship, tell others about your church, or welcome the stranger, you bring what you have. And miracles happen.

I'm convinced that there are two ways of seeing the world, and which way you choose will have a profound impact on how you live and practice your faith. *If* you employ the lens of scarcity, you will always be in the desert. There will never be enough. And so, in fear and anxiety you'll guard what you have. You'll see change as a risk and every stranger as a threat. You'll compete and collide, form factions and divide. We will convince ourselves that we can't feed hungry crowds because there isn't even enough for us to go around. Insulated and huddled, we'll lose sight of our purpose. We'll shrivel, and we'll shrink. And we'll deserve it.

Thank God there is another way. The lens of abundance tells the truth about who we are and who God is. Friends, I want to say this as clearly as I can this morning: Scarcity is a lie. Scarcity is a false god, a pernicious idol, intent on turning us against our neighbors and away from what is holy and good. The truth is, we are blessed with more than enough to meet the needs of the hungry crowd. We are compelled by the inspiration of heavenly feasts and overflowing baskets and tables where people of God come from the north and the south, from the east and from the west, from the city of Indianapolis and the nation of Afghanistan, and sit and share the goodness of God because we have been provided abundance. And if that's how we see the world, if that's how we see our call, our vision will inevitably be cast beyond what seems possible toward what only God can do.

Two ways of seeing the world. Two perspectives on

the needs of our neighbors. Let's try it out. 2.6 miles northeast of where you now sit there is an apartment complex with six hundred units. The people who live there are our neighbors, scripturally and literally. We may not encounter these neighbors often, but when our vision extends beyond the insulated huddle, we'll see them. When our ears are tuned to the needs of others, we will hear them. We'll hear about conditions that you and I would not tolerate. On June 12th, a fire destroyed the main office building at the center of the complex. Eleven weeks later, Sara and I drove into that parking lot to pray. And what we found was the rubble remained as it was that Saturday night in June. Now look. The needs of our neighbors are impossible to ignore. But, if we operate through the lens of scarcity, we *can* excuse our inaction. The needs are too great, the issues too complex, our resources too limited. There are a hundred reasons to leave it alone when you are living in the desert.

But what if the grass is green? What if abundance is the truth? What if God is calling us to attempt what seems impossible in order to witness to the truth that *nothing* will be impossible for God? Are we willing to take that risk? Are *you* willing to take that risk? And if not, what is the purpose of abundance in the first place?

You give them something to eat. Friends, what have you been given that God is calling you to offer in faith and hope and love? Which skills, gifts, and talents have you hidden away, convinced that they will never be enough? How might we serve God as a congregation by offering what we have to the God who gave us everything?

Do you remember how this story began? The boat Jesus is on comes ashore and there is, you guessed it, a large crowd of people. They're dusty people; they're dirty people; they're hungry people; they're needy people. At least that's what I picture. What does Jesus see? Sheep with no shepherd. I'm exhausted, fatigued, tired, but how does Jesus feel? His heart was moved with compassion. I don't know what to do about all of this, but what does Jesus do? He teaches. He preaches.

And then, when the sheep get hungry, he feeds them with an abundance they never could have imagined without him. He tells the crowd to go sit down in the green grass. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

Second Church, if we are wise enough to acknowledge abundance and bold enough to bring what we have, expect miracles. Amen.