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Bethel UMC Communion - August 5, 2018
Matthew 14:13-21

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. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸And Jesus said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Nothing or Something?

“We have nothing here.”

This is the disciples response to Jesus’ preposterous notion that they might possibly find enough food to feed all these people—five thousand men plus countless women and children. They followed Jesus here to this desert, to be near him, to feel his compassion and his healing touch. They followed Jesus here and now the evening has come and the crowd is restless, hungry, pressing in. And can't you just hear the disciples grumbling to themselves: *The place is deserted: The hour is late: and there's no time to search. The crowd is massive: there's no food anyways, not even enough for US!!*

“We have nothing here.”

The disciples rummage in empty backpacks, hoping that a perfunctory search for food will satisfy Jesus. “They need not go away,” Jesus says. “Give them something to eat,”

“We have nothing here!”

To prove their point, they turn over the last backpack and shake it... “Oh, well... except for a few loaves and a couple fish.” They count them: five squashed loaves, two dry fish. They raise doubtful eyebrows when Jesus asks them to bring him these pitiful scraps from the bottom of that last bag. But then they look at Jesus’ face. They’ve seen that look before. They know what it means. They bring him the loaves. They bring him the fish. And they wait, incredulous but expectant.

“We have nothing here.”

Oh my friends, how often does the world bombard us with this lie??

You will have no friends until you wear this designer brand.

You will have no transportation until you drive this luxury car.

You will have no romance until you purchase this diamond.

You will have no beauty until you pay for plastic surgery.

“We have nothing here.”

This is so much a part of our culture, it weighs so heavily on us, we forget we ever knew how to breathe. It’s suffocating. Suffocation leads to apathy; apathy leads to hopelessness. And hopelessness drives away any thought that we might be good, beloved, of value, that we have anything to offer.

“We have nothing here.”

These are hopeless words, empty words, words incapable of carrying promise or releasing imagination. These words stifle creativity and leave no space for blessing.

But Jesus invites us to take a deep breath with him when he says: “Bring them here to me.” The disciples take him the measly offering: five loaves and two fish.

With no thought about how comically small this meal is, Jesus looks up to heaven and blesses the food. Then he breaks the bread and cuts up the fish. He hands the blessed food to his disciples, and they give it to the crowds. And they keep giving it away and giving it away and giving it away..... until all the people have had their fill, & the disciples gather up quite a bit more than they began with.

My friends, hear the Good News: when Jesus offers blessing, in the form of bread broken and shared fish, Jesus offers himself. And when we take him in, Jesus nourishes us with his blessing so we can share that blessing with others. When we sing, we can praise God, lifting our voices in one great song. When we tear down our walls, we can open our hearts sharing our lives with one another. When we serve God in the world, we can demonstrate that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. And the blessings will spread and grow and multiply.

Some preachers might proclaim today that this miracle pushes us to remember that IF WE TRUST - GOD WILL PROVIDE. It is a miracle that (through the generations) Christians have clung to in the worst of times, and glorified in the best of times. God is good – all the time.

But here is the problem with that interpretation: We are living through a recession. There are people in this community and in our country that have very little. We live on a planet where resources are not evenly spread. There can be abundance in one place and utter desolation in another. Needs are great, but resources are limited. People die of hunger every day. *Bread For The World*, a faith-based organization that works to end hunger on an international level, estimates that 16,000 children die every day of hunger. That is one child every five seconds.

A skeptic of the Christian faith might ask, “Where is the miracle in that?” Miracle stories are difficult to preach on when the reality of what individuals face every day is dark and dismal. Why did God provide for the thousands that day on the shore 2,000 years ago, but not for the 16,000 children that die every day today? Why not for those right here in Columbia who are struggling to make ends meet? That is a question I cannot answer.

This morning's scripture lesson can be a beautiful reminder of God's grace and power in our lives. But it can also be an opportunity to struggle with some of the unanswered questions we face in the reality of the world that we live in. I do not think that this story is about the loaves – or the fishes. In fact I do not think that any reading of the Gospel should be done as a way to literally interpret the words on the page and make sure that they ring true for us today. I think that they are meant to inspire us, to call us, and to push us to a ministry greater than any that we can envision ourselves.

The disciples are wrong when they say, “We have nothing here,” because they do, in fact, have *something*! They have five loaves and two fish, which is more than nothing. They had the exact amount they needed, once Jesus' blessing got hold of them. But the disciples were too busy worrying to notice the what they had.

What if the parable had gone like this:

We have something here.

We have five loaves and two fish. Sure, they are a bit squashed and bit a dry. But we have them. Jesus, what can you do with them? You can bless them, and break them, and share them, and your nourishing presence can overflow through this deserted place.

We have something here.

We have a group of people who have come together to praise your name, O LORD, and to share in your blessing. There are fewer perhaps than there have been in years past, but they are here. Jesus, what can you do with them? Your blessing flows into and out of our hearts. Your gifts inspire us, and your love moves us to serve others in your holy name.

We have something here.

We have all the good gifts Christ has given us. We have the grace and the energy to use those gifts to serve God in this world, this world that tries to suffocate us with the lie that WE HAVE NOTHING. But this lie vanishes when we take that deep breath of blessing, which comes from the Spirit of God. Jesus the Christ blesses us in the breaking of the bread, and when we share that blessing, it spreads and grows and multiplies.

Bethel United - we have something here, today.

We have a table with a simple meal. We have an invitation to enter into God's Word and God's love. To be transformed ourselves by the grace of God offered to us this day in the bread and wine. In the body and blood. Broken for us. Poured out for us.

We have something here.

As we come to the table this day, may we be filled with *SOMETHING* we could share with the others, that they too may experience a miracle today. Thanks be to God who blesses us to be blessings in the world. Amen.

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.