

Last Sunday, we finished up Jesus' long string of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13. After that, Jesus goes to his hometown, Nazareth, and is promptly kicked out. He then hears of the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, and that's where today's story begins.

It is apparently no longer safe to be a prophet of the gospel in the Roman Empire and so Jesus flees, partly in grief and partly in fear, to a desolate space. But Jesus is popular and people, hearing that he is on the move, follow him. As Jesus returns from his solitude, he sees a great crowd of people assembled, and he has compassion on them.

In mid-June, I preached a sermon that explored how for Jesus, compassion leads to action. Back in Matthew 9, Jesus sees the crowds and has a visceral, gut-deep experience of love for them, a love which causes him to help them. The same thing happens here again in Matthew 14. Jesus sees this crowd, is moved with compassion, and starts healing the sick.

After a little while, the disciples approach Jesus with a dilemma. We can imagine Peter, the disciples' spokesperson, approaching Jesus and speaking quietly: "Rabbi, we gotta let these people go. There's not a grocery store or restaurant for miles, and they're going to get hungry soon."

The disciples, like Jesus, have a moment of compassion, but they're not sure how to move toward action. They know people are getting hungry, and they want the people to have food; the best idea they can muster is to dismiss everyone so that they can fend for themselves. I don't think we should be hard on the disciples here; they speak from a place of caring and love, but as usual, they underestimate Jesus.

"We don't need to send them away." Jesus says, "You feed them."

You can almost see the disciples' faces contort and pucker in confusion as they try to see where Jesus is going with this. A couple of them exchange concerned glances: Jesus has lost his mind.

"What do you have?" he asks.

Momentary silence. And then: "We got nothing."

"Well," one of them says, "we do have a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, but that's not going to do any good."

"Bring them here," Jesus says. He takes the loaves and the fish, breaks them, and says a blessing over them. Then he hands the pieces back to the disciples. "Go and feed the people," he says. And so the disciples move out, distributing fish sandwiches. When all is said and done, they satisfy the hunger of 5,000 families (a crowd bigger than the population of Selinsgrove), and still have enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets.

Did you notice what Jesus does? Yes, he uses a few morsels of food to feed 5,000 families. But it's not actually Jesus who does the feeding! It's the disciples! Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd, and they balk and stammer that they can't provide that level of catering. But Jesus doesn't grumble and say, "Ye of little faith! I'll do it!" Instead, he takes what the disciples have, blesses it, and then hands it *back* to the disciples who then distribute it to the crowd. It's not Jesus who feeds the crowd; it's the disciples! Jesus tells them to feed the crowd, and then helps them do it.

Fast forward fifty years to the city of Corinth in Greece, about 800 miles northwest of Galilee, across the Mediterranean Sea. The church in Corinth is having some problems. They can't decide who to follow. They fall into a debate about who the best apostle is: some claim Paul, others claim Peter, some claim this dude Apollos. So Paul writes them a letter and tells them to cool it with the bickering. They don't need to pick a favorite apostle, he argues, because they should all be following Jesus. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" he writes, "Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:5-6).

Paul argues that many have worked to spread the gospel, but it is ultimately God who made it happen. Or, to use the imagery that Paul uses, many hands have worked to cultivate the kingdom of heaven, but it is ultimately God who made it sprout.

Hey that image sounds familiar doesn't it? It should! For the past three weeks we've heard parable after parable about the kingdom of heaven—and nearly all of them were about sprouting plants! In the spirit of those parables, Paul reminds the people in Corinth that as followers of Jesus, we all work to cultivate the Kingdom of Heaven; but it is ultimately God who makes it grow and blossom. (By the way, this is the sentiment expressed in the ELCA's slogan: "God's work. Our hands.")

And this is the same point that Jesus demonstrates for the disciples when they feed the 5,000. The disciples confess their inadequacy. They want to help the hungry crowd, but they don't know how; they don't feel like they have what it takes. But then Jesus takes their limited resources, their limited ability, blesses it, and creates out of it an abundance. On their own, the disciples don't have what it takes; but with Jesus, they are more than enough.

Cultivating the Kingdom of Heaven is daunting work. The Kingdom of Heaven is all about ushering in the reign of God's justice and mercy; but there is so much injustice in this world...where would we even begin? So many churches, so many people, desire to serve the Kingdom and affect change for good but have no idea where to start. So often we feel we are not up to the task; we are inadequate. But today, Jesus tells us that is not true. Today Jesus shows us that he can turn our meager offerings into an abundance; a few loaves of stale bread and dried fish in the hands of Jesus are the makings of a feast.

Back in the 1970s, a pastor named Art Simon, who served Trinity Lutheran Church on New York City's Lower East Side, became overwhelmed with the amount of hunger and poverty in his

neighborhood. He called twelve of his Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Catholic colleagues in the area and convened a meeting to talk about what they might do about poverty and hunger. In 1974, they founded Bread for the World, an organization that seeks, not only to feed the hungry, but to end world hunger by appealing to policy makers in Washington, D.C. through letter writing campaigns.

Bread for the World was and continues to be a grassroots organization, functioning purely on the faithfulness of Christians willing to participate. Reverend Simon recalls, "We began with a tiny seed of an idea, but the seed had life and, when planted, God gave growth." Bread for the World is a great modern example of the feeding of the 5,000. A few pastors looked at the problem of hunger and said, "we got nothing." But they handed what little they had over to Jesus, and now Bread for the World is a strong influence in the effort to end world hunger. They have led policy changes that have decreased hunger both here and abroad, and they believe they can end world hunger completely by 2030.

When we look at the needs of Beavertown or Beaver Springs or Snyder County or Pennsylvania or the United States or the world, it can be so overwhelming; what could we ever do to change things? The answer is that alone, we can't do much of anything; but with Jesus, we can do everything. When we offer up what little we have, be it our money, our time, our talents, our prayers, our good works, when we give to Jesus out of our inadequacies, God gives the growth and we find that we are more than enough.

So give to Jesus what little you have in service to the Kingdom; and watch as God turns it into an abundance!

Amen.