

A Feast from Nothing

When we left Jesus last week, he was in the midst of telling parables, picture stories. He was trying to re-train the disciples' vision, to help us see the power and beauty of the kingdom breaking in right before our eyes, like yeast hidden in flour and a mustard seed sown in a field. On the heels of telling those parables and others, Jesus heads home to Nazareth where he is belittled and written off in his home synagogue. Then Matthew shifts the action to Herod's palace for a bit. Having gotten wind of all that this preacher from the sticks is up to, Herod grows anxious. These prophets will not leave him alone. They haunt him and insist on telling him when he is trampling all that is good for the sake of his greed and his wrong-hearted desires. And he is not one who likes to be told "no." John has told this supposed King of the Jews "no" quite a bit. The last straw is when John insists that Herod's brother's wife is not simply his for the taking. Herod imprisons John and then throws himself a birthday banquet. His boasting gets the best of him, and he winds up having John killed for the sake of saving his own pride. John's disciples bury him and share the grim news with Jesus. [Read Matthew 14:13-33]

Nothing. They insist they have nothing. John has been killed for confronting a corrupt dictator. The crowds keep coming. And the disciples are scraping the bottom of the barrel. Jesus, too, is in search of a moment, just a moment to grieve, to rest. And yet, he sees things a bit differently. The disciples grow anxious. It is late. Everyone is far from home. Everyone is hungry. It is time to call it a night. This is the one story that all four gospels share. This is the one story to which the entire tradition points. The disciples are still learning to see with new eyes, but it is hard. Scarcity and anxiety are the name of the larger world's game. Jesus has commissioned them to cast out demons and heal the sick. They have seen him do these very things with their own eyes. And they have been able to do it too in his name. But that mantra of "not enough, not enough, not enough," is very hard to un-hear and un-learn. Those empty pockets and growling bellies and grieving hearts are hard to argue with. The hunger of a ravenous empire breathing down their necks is hard to ignore. "We've got nothing," they tell him.

Technically, it is not true. They do have five loaves and two fish, but that would not even be enough to feed Jesus and the twelve. They rightly insist that this is not enough to feed the thousands who have flocked to the hillside, but what they also know is that with this meager snack, they'll actually still be hungry, too. My hunch is that the disciples' concerns are about more than food; my hunch is that the honeymoon is wearing off, and they are wondering if all that Jesus preaches and promises is really enough and if they are up to the task of following where he leads. Is it enough...are they enough...is he enough?

Maybe it depends on where we are sitting. Are we sitting among those who have persistently followed Jesus from town to town just to be near him, just to hear the words of hope he offers? Or are we sitting with the disciples, the weary ones who now know that John, the one who proclaimed Jesus' kingdom, the one who like Jesus dared to speak truth to power has paid the ultimate price for his passion. I'm inclined to hear my voice echoing the disciples': "Um, Jesus, we're worn out, the budget is tight, the numbers are not what they were. How exactly do you expect us to feed all these people with two measly fish and a couple of handfuls of rolls?" I wouldn't blame Jesus for shaking his head, benching this team, and recruiting some new disciples from the thousands sitting on the grass. But he doesn't. Instead he takes the nothing they offer. And with echoes of the meal he will share with his disciples in that Upper Room and the meal he offers us at this table, he blesses the meager offering and breaks the loaves apart and hands them to the disciples, who in turn share the food with the crowds and then gather the leftovers, the ridiculously abundant leftovers.

From all we can tell, the crowds do not know a miracle has occurred. They just know that they have been fed, that they have eaten their fill without the worry that they left their wallets at home or that their bank account is overdrawn. They have eaten their fill without having to prove that they are hungry or worthy. Matthew tells us that Jesus immediately ushers the disciples away, but I can't help but wonder about the crowds. I like to imagine that they linger underneath the stars. I like to think that they make their way down the mountain filled with good things, given strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, as the hymn sings. I like to picture their marveling at the picnic they just shared, a feast that stands in stark contrast to the oppressive empire that insists on our earning our keep, paying our dues, and justifying our existence.

But what are the disciples thinking? In their boarding the boat and heading out to sea, do they find a way to marvel, too? Do they pause even for a second to offer a prayer of gratitude for the feast they have just witnessed? I hope so, because lest we—or they—forget, the disciples have been fed, too. Yes, they are participants in the blessed miracle Jesus performs, but they are fed, too, more than the paltry snack they found in someone's backpack. They are fed, too, which is good, because too often we who serve, we who want to feed the masses and save the world can forget that Jesus intends to feed us, to nurture us, to save us, too.

The boat ride the disciples take is not an easy one. Once again, Jesus goes off on his own to pray, and the disciples find themselves in the thick of a storm. Jesus comes to them through the waves. They're terrified; but Jesus assures them that it is he. Peter, bless his heart wants to try, too. This is the only gospel where Peter leaves the boat. I've preached on this passage before, praising Peter's gumption, but today the text sounds different to me. Today, I can almost hear Jesus' sigh. He calls Peter to come. And Peter starts to sink. We're not meant to walk on water, of course. We're meant to trust the one who does, the one who from the dawn of time has parted the waters to make a way for those who cannot make a way on our own.

It has often been said that God helps those who help themselves. Truth be told, that's not scriptural; it is nowhere in the bible. In fact this morning's scripture seems to tell us just the opposite. Jesus helps those who cannot help themselves; Jesus feeds those who cannot feed themselves; Jesus saves those who cannot save themselves. This is really good news, but it may be a bit difficult to hear. After all, we like to be the ones who help, the ones who feed; on occasion we also like to be the hero, the one who does the saving. I like to play Wonder Woman, not the one Wonder Woman flies in to save.

I'm sure you have seen those flyers here or on bulletin boards at restaurants or libraries with small tickets that can be torn off. The tickets usually have a phone number, a web site, or an email address. The ones we have posted here are for domestic abuse and a food pantry. The thing is that unless the one posting the flyers tears off at least one ticket, the likelihood is that no one else will. Even when no one is watching, we are not enthusiastic about admitting that we might be in need in some way, but we are all in need. Yes, we in this sanctuary are for the most part infinitely more privileged than the majority of the world. We may not wonder where we will sleep tonight or where our next meal will come from, but we are all in need of saving. And we

cannot save ourselves. But we do not have to. Yes, Jesus expects us to feed the hungry, to speak out against injustice, to share what we have, but he also makes it clear that he comes to feed us, too, because he knows we need to be fed. And that is exactly what he does, if we let him.

It is so easy to buy into the voices that shout about scarcity, the forces that tell us that there will never be enough, that we will never be enough. But that is not the gospel. That is not God's saving word in Jesus Christ. God's saving word is this:

The Lord is my shepherd—even when I don't think I need one.

I lack nothing—the Lord makes sure of that.

The Lord lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters—even when I insist that I am fine.

The Lord keeps me alive. The Lord guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name—no matter how often I insist on going my own way.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me—loving me through my tears, my anger, and my grief and catching me when I am sinking.

Your rod and your staff—they protect me, ever guiding me back to you, to the way of life.

You set a table for me—and make a feast out of my nothing—right in front of my enemies, whom you happen to love, too.

You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over!

Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord's house as long as I live—because your grace and mercy insist that I have a home with you, always.¹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Psalm 23, Common English Bible in italics.