

“Resourcing the Five Thousand”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
August 3, 2014

Isaiah 55:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

‘Why spend money for what isn’t food, and your earnings for what doesn’t satisfy?
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.’

Isaiah 55:2

Let us pray... O God,

Give us the means to find the bread we need each day
and strengthen us to your good purpose.

Equip us with the resources we need to truly become whom you created us to be.

Amen

I have grown to love this story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 more and more,
because of the different things that can be discovered in it like buried treasure –
like those parables about the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is one of the first images I saw of Jesus that have helped shape my understanding
of who he is and what he is about.

There are layers to this particular story with different levels of meaning,
and like an archaeologist, we have to dig down to bring our discoveries to light...

This is the one “miracle” story that is in each of the Gospels;

So, something happened and the question is “What?” – or maybe “Why?”

There are a couple ways of understanding
the “miracle” part of this story –

First of all, for all those people to have enough to eat and be satisfied
strikes me as being a big miracle right there!

Next, we could take the miracle at face value:

that Jesus’ blessing caused the bread and the fish to actually regenerate –
though wouldn’t that be kind of a scary thing to see happening that way?

Another option is the idea that the spontaneous act of someone sharing their supper
of bread and fish would inspire generosity as others did the same,
and so forth until everyone had enough.

This reminds me of that beautiful story about “stone soup”

where a clever hobo tricks a fearful town into a spontaneous community picnic.

He does this by placing a stone in boiling water and inviting curious onlookers
to bring a vegetable or something else to add,

and they open up their hidden stores of food and their hearts in the process.

Both versions of this miracle speak to God’s character as demonstrated through Jesus –
or as Paul would say as ‘God in Christ’.

Willard, p.2

This narrative teaches us that God is concerned about feeding hungry people and that – like the passage from Isaiah in this morning’s lesson, the usual barriers and limitations don’t apply... like paying for it. It also teaches us that God’s care is available for thousands – or even a limitless multitude, especially when the text tells us that the women and children weren’t even counted. It teaches us that people matter to God as a group and as individuals.

At the very beginning of this story, Jesus sees this crowd waiting for him on the beach. He then shows compassion for them by healing those who were sick. We don’t know who he heals or how many, just that he does this – and apparently, for free! So, it would seem that Jesus not only practiced welfare, but also universal health care! Jesus was addressing basic needs – sort of a triage for the situation at hand, and at day’s end in this desolate place, it would have been difficult for all those people to find help. However, Jesus was able to provide them with what they needed.

The Gospel of John picks up what happened the next day as this crowd follows Jesus back across the sea, seeking another free meal, but Jesus discourages this. At first he appeared to be for indiscriminate welfare, but then, he comes down hard on taking advantage of the “system”, so to speak.

Jesus was giving them a chance to stand on their own two feet. He was not simply doling out charity, but providing an opportunity for a better life – an authentic life, an eternal life for life right now. Jesus was resourcing them for the task of becoming self-actualized, mature human beings – who would follow him and continue his work.

We are not always quite ready for this – it can be a process that has to happen gradually as we give up childish ways. Take for example, the church potluck where all the food was lined up on a set of long tables for everybody to take their plates and sample from each of the casseroles and dishes that were prepared. Well, there were a limited number of apples; So to get everyone to be fair, the pastor wrote a note that said, “Please take only one apple. Remember God is watching.” But at the other end of the line – where the brownies were, little Johnny the pastor’s kid wrote another note that said: “Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

Willard, p.3

When I was at the Wild Goose Festival,

I met Paul Pearce who is the director of a Catholic charitable organization called the Christian Foundation For Children and Aging.

One of their programs is called Unbound –

which coordinates donations for the ‘sponsorship’ of children, families, and seniors in impoverished communities overseas, seeking to *resource* them to go the next step to lift themselves out of poverty.

That means their goal is ‘to offer a hand up – not a handout’

and they do this by linking up donors with individuals and families, so that there is a personal connection.

Workers associated with this organization

initially visit to determine basic needs.

Then, they work with children to set ‘educational goals’, make visits to the elderly, and gather small groups of families to help them work together and help their communities, too.

According to their website, Unbound sees results like this:

Over time, families rely less on sponsorship and more on their own income-generation activities.

...[Sponsoring] partner[s] in this effort... provide direct, personal support for [their] friend and [his/]her family.

[The Unbound program] encourages everyone. It gives them choices.

It allows them to develop their talents and pursue their dreams.

<https://www.unbound.org/Sponsor/HowItWorks>

This group also used the arts to promote education and peacemaking to bring people together in a project that was documented on film [“Rise and Dream”].

Barclay Martin – whom I also met at Wild Goose, is a musician from Kansas City, KS, who was sent by Unbound to the Philippines to organize a community concert that would include a presentation by local children.

This was not simply to be a talent show – as several famous Filipino musicians worked with 13 talented children, teaching them to perform with traditional musical instruments and to respect their culture in the process.

These children accomplished a complex musical performance thanks to a rigorous practice schedule right along with the demands of ‘school, work, and family responsibilities’ – a number of whom went on to higher education and employment to better themselves and their families.

Parents as well as the community mobilized to help them be part of this peace-themed concert that provided a non-threatening bridge between Christians, Muslims, and other ethnic groups in that region.

Three times the number of people expected, actually attended...

<http://www.riseanddream.com/about.php>

Willard, p.4

The people of Unbound – like others working in similar programs,
including the Caille de Milagros farm-worker community of Dade City,
are in accord with the Spirit of what Jesus did in feeding the 5,000 –
not just giving someone a hand-out,
but giving them a hand to pull *themselves* up.

It is the kind of thing all people everywhere should be doing together
to fight poverty and the divisions that lead to war.

Like Jesus said,

“Humanity does not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God” –
the words, the songs, and the stories that God is still speaking.

Amen

Our scripture lesson from Isaiah 55:1-5 is a poem that uses imagery anticipating the end of Jewish exile in Babylon and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. This is a promise not only to satisfy the physical hunger and thirst of God's people, but also their spiritual need for loving community...

[55:1] All of you who are thirsty, come to the water!

Whoever has no money, come, buy food and eat!

Without money, at no cost, buy wine and milk!

[2] Why spend money for what isn't food,
and your earnings for what doesn't satisfy?

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest of feasts.

[3] Listen and come to me; listen, and you will live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful loyalty to David.

[4] Look, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a prince and commander of peoples.

[5] Look, you will call a nation you don't know,
a nation you don't know will run to you because of the Lord your God,
the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words.

Matthew 14:13-21 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

- ¹³ Now when Jesus heard this,
 he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart.
But when the crowds heard it,
 they followed him on foot from the towns.
- ¹⁴ As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them,
 and healed their sick.
- ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said,
 “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over;
 send the crowds away to go into the villages
 and buy food for themselves.”
- ¹⁶ Jesus said,
 “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”
- ¹⁷ They said to him,
 “We have only five loaves here and two fish.”
- ¹⁸ And he said,
 “Bring them here to me.”
- ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass;
 and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven,
 and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples,
 and the disciples gave them to the crowds.
- ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied.
 And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.
- ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.