

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now 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 he 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.

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Limitless gratitude ushers into a life of Limitless generosity, which ushers into a life of Limitless abundance.

As we have approached this last week of our fall Stewardship series, I have wondered what you thought I might say about limitless abundance. I have wondered...if you may be wondering...if I was going to say that God wants to give you lots and lots of money. Or perhaps you were wondering if I was going to say that when you have gratitude and generosity, you will have great wealth, an abundance of possessions and even greater means to gather more.

Hopefully you know me well enough by now to know that I'm not going to say that. Because I don't believe it's true. And because I believe that is a false abundance--a mirage that shortchanges the real abundance that God is making in the world.

Today we find a scene of abundance...in a deserted place. We find Jesus, hanging with the disciples and about 5,000 of their closest friends. The day has gotten long, and so the disciples raise a concern: "Jesus, the people are about to be hungry. Send them away so they can buy something in the village to eat." No, he responds. Don't send them away; you give them something to eat. You feed them.

I can just about imagine the look on their faces.

Seriously? We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. You want **us...**to feed **them...**with this?

Here in Matthew they don't say any more, but in Mark the disciples just ask the question Right out loud--the question we are all wondering: "How can we?" We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. How can we feed the multitude? How can we possibly make a difference here?

Martin Luther King Jr. said "The Arc of History is long, but it bends toward justice."

I have to confess: sometimes I have trouble believing that. Sometimes I have trouble believing that things are headed in the right direction. I spend my days, my work, my life striving to uncover grace in the world, and sometimes it feels like every where I look, every rock, or leaf, or life I pull back...all I see is brokenness. Hurting hearts. Hungry stomachs. Fearful eyes. Defeated spirits. How can I possibly make a difference here? How can we feed the multitude? How can we possibly make a dent in all of the hunger that paralyzes this world? (Pulling out money) I've got a loaf of bread, you've got a loaf, let's see, let's put those together, and you two have a fish, ok looks like five loaves, two fish.

Jesus, seriously? What good is this going to do? How can we?

And Jesus gives them the answer: "Bring them to me." Bring your loaves and your fish to me, and I will Bless it, and break it, make it enough. I will make it enough for the world to eat, and be filled. I will make it enough for children to thrive. I will make it enough for all who want it to have meaningful work. I will make it enough for war to stop. Bring it to me; bring your gifts to me; bring your life to me. I will make it enough for abundance.

I wonder if the hardest part of being a Christian is that in the midst of all evidence to the contrary, we are asked to believe--to persistently believe--that God is really, actually doing something, that God is really transforming this broken world in to the heaven we long for. And then, to make it even harder, we are asked to stake our lives on that fragile belief.

At the beginning of this series I told you that I believe that stewardship is not primarily about raising money for the church. I told you that Stewardship is about having our lives shaped and reshaped to bend along the curve of following Jesus. It's about staking our lives, sometimes against all odds, on God's outrageous invitation for us to join up with the most important thing that will ever happen in the history of creation.

I've asked several of you to share with me, personally, why do you give your money away, and why do you give it to the church? And I'll tell you, this is it for me, personally--this is the thing that really gets me. I may give some out of a sense of gratitude and thanks to God, and some out of a desire to be generous, to want more for someone else even if it means less for me, but it's the undying hope for abundance that makes me dig deep in my pockets. I will gladly give until it hurts, I gladly push every year to give a little bit more, a little bit more, because I believe in my gut that this is not all there is, that this is not as good as it is going to get. Because I know I'm hungry, and I know you're hungry, and I know the whole world is hungry, and Because I know when these gifts, when this money stays in my hands, it's nothing more than 5 loaves and 2 fish--maybe enough to feed me, but not for very long. As long as it's in my hands, it will never be enough for me. I always want more, and more, and more, and yet I myself can never come up with enough for abundance--not for me, and certainly not for the whole world. But I've caught a glimpse of it--a glimpse of what will be, a glimpse of those moments when, against all odds, there is fullness and abundant life: the joy of adoptive parents, the embrace of true and costly forgiveness, the first rush of clean water from a new well, moments when the veil is pierced and suddenly Earth, for a moment, sure feels a lot like heaven. When I get just a little taste of it, I think, "I want to be all in on THAT."

Friends, this is why we as a church are called to a connectional ministry as United Methodists. We are called to a ministry that extends beyond our local ministry here in the community of Westbury. It's why each year we pass on a portion of our offering to the worldwide ministry of the United Methodist Church. Methodists are known throughout the world for their commitment to creating and sustaining schools, hospitals, colleges, refugee camps, and more. Because of these gifts, there are people on the ground all over the world

living out the good news of Jesus Christ in ministries that are transforming people, communities, and nations.

I recently learned from another Methodist preacher about Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, who served some years ago as the Director of International Affairs for the American Jewish Committee. He was widely known and respected as one of the most influential ecumenical leaders of his day. And on one occasion as he met with Methodists, he had this to say--he said, "Everywhere I go in the world I see Methodists making peace. I see leaders of the rising African nations and learn that they were trained in your schools. I meet educated populations that stand up and hold their leaders accountable and I learn that they too were trained in your schools. Everywhere I go in Africa I see missionaries doing work that's been going on for over a hundred years: making peace, giving hope and dignity, creating community. I see the same thing in South America. I see the same thing in Asia. You people are the peacemakers of the world.

You people. You. You give them something to eat.

Oh, but Lord, there is so much to do. All we have is these things. How can we possibly feed the world?

Jesus' response echoes: Bring them to me. Bring your gifts; bring your life. Lay them on the table, lay them here, and I will bless them. And break them. And share them with the world. And it will be a feast of abundance. Hallelujah. Thanks be to God.

Summary: Like the disciples who wondered how they would feed the hungry thousands, we wonder how we can bring wholeness to our broken world. Jesus invites us to bring our gifts to him so that they might become a means of grace for the healing of the world.