

Leftovers as a Sign of Grace

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Matthew 14:13-21

As we were preparing for the General Assembly, one of the primary tasks was a five minute speech. It was a great team effort, and confirmed what I already knew – that a five minute speech is much harder to produce than a 10 minute one, or 15, or 20. So we worked and we worked. We knew two things about that speech; one, that we wanted it to focus on the theme of hope, and two, that we wanted to include an account from the gospels to make the point. So I, in fact, did what I haven't done in a long time; I read through the gospels fully once and scanned them again several times for inspiration.

The good news is that plenty of inspiration came. I believe we ended up with six or seven options, with many more to choose from, that indicated moments in Jesus' ministry when the people were expecting one thing, based on a lack of hope, and Jesus gave them another. That is to say, expectations were transformed by hope. Of those six or seven options, we ended up going with the story of the afternoon of Easter, when the dejected disciples encountered their risen Lord and hope was restored.

At the end of the day, of course, the choice of a particular gospel passage to buttress the speech probably didn't influence things all that much one way or the other. I was grateful for the opportunity to make the case, and I was grateful for the fact that the gospel, our gospel, is permeated with moments when Jesus transforms expectations.

The point this morning is not so much that our gospel lesson from Matthew 14 came in a close second for that speech, though it did. The point this morning is the power of this story and how it punctuates one of the gospel's core themes, defying and transforming expectations, offering hope when hope seems to be lost, inviting us to trust Jesus and his promises.

And it seems particularly timely, if not providential, that we would encounter this central moment on a morning when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, acting out this promise of hope and abundance and trust as we break bread and share the cup.

Each gospel account is a bit different, but let's recall how Matthew tells the story this morning. Jesus is seeking respite and retreat, but the growing crowds will have none of it. So rather than withdrawing from them, he reengages to teach, but on this day, primarily to heal them. Clearly this is not a well-organized conference, with name tags and agendas and a highly orchestrated meal plan. At the end of the day the disciples, the event managers, suggest that they simply disperse, urging the crowd to head back into town to get food on their own.

We've been to gathering like this – are meals included or not? The answer here is no. But Jesus will have none of it. You feed them, he tells them. *You* feed them. You can imagine the response: nervous laughter, staring at the ground to avoid eye contact, sideways glances to determine who will speak on behalf of reality and common sense. Feed them? With what? We learn later that there were over 5000 people present, plus women and children, who didn't count in the tally.

Feed them? With what? We have five loaves of bread and two fish, barely enough for ourselves, let alone anyone else. Feed them? With what?

You can see how this epistle was in consideration for a General Assembly speech. A church, standing in or the broader culture, not being sure it had hope anymore, hope in its own capacity, in its own story, in its own gifts, in its own future, even in its own Lord. Feed them? With what?

And it's timely, if not providential, that we hear all of this on a Sunday when we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, because what happens next is that Jesus – foreshadowing his own last meal with his friends – takes what he has, such a small amount of food for so many, and prays over it and blesses it, as we will do in a few moments. And he gave it to the servers and then begins to distribute the food to this massive crowd who have come seeking hope and who receive hope.

Charles Cousar writes that “the resources the disciples can muster are meager, but Jesus helps them to discover that such resources are sufficient. In his hands they become more than enough.” (*Texts for Preaching: Year A*, page 432)

So much is happening here, and it would be wise to get out of the way, to let the connection between this story and our celebration of communion do the heavy lifting, to provide meaning, to invite each of us and all of us to connect the dots. And we will do just that. But do allow me to plant a seed or two, or three, as you place yourself in that moment – either as an anxious disciple or as a seeking crowd member or both – and in this moment, and connect the two.

You are invited. Perhaps you have seen Coke products recently – I am a Diet Coke man myself – whose labels include individual names. “Share a Coke with Bill,” they will say, or Alice, or Rich, or Amanda. I wondered how the Coke people decided what names to use – I was hardly surprised to find my name on a bottle. What I thought though about communion is that regardless of the common nature of our name, or its uniqueness, is that we all will find our name here. “John, you are welcome here,” or “Lynette, you are welcome here,” or ___ or ___ or ___, you are welcome here. This is not marketing cleverness, but a gospel promise. You are invited and welcomed.

And because you are invited and welcomed, all are invited and welcomed. Jesus didn't instruct the disciples to ask for credentials before they could be fed. He simply said “feed them.” Not some. All. This is a reminder to all of us within the church that as much as religion has been characterized by who's in and who's out, whether it's been about beliefs or behaviors or appearances, that Jesus is in the welcoming business, the hospitality business, the including business.

It would be difficult for each of us to accept our invitation to the table – knowing our own brokenness and shortcoming – without embracing the promise that all are invited, and that it’s our job – like the disciples – to make that welcome real, to lower thresholds, to remove barriers, to feed without question or qualification so that all can experience the abundance we have experienced.

There are moments when I believe the gospel writers had tremendous senses of humor, and this is one. Not only was there enough food – feeding more than 5000 with a few fish and a little bread. There were leftovers. Twelve baskets, to be precise. It’s as if Jesus, defying and transforming expectations by feeding the crowd at all, punctuates the moment by providing leftovers. It is a reminder to them and to us that when we are faced with a hopeless situation, there is enough, and more than enough, to meet needs, and to meet them abundantly.

You can connect the abundance themes to your own experience, of course, but it seems to me that because there was ample food and more than ample food if we would trust and re-locate our expectations, that...

There is ample comfort for those who grieve, compassion for those who suffer, recovery for those who are addicted.

In the global context, there is ample peace in Israel and Palestine if and when adversaries and those who support them can transform expectations.

In our city, there is ample education for all children when those in power can look at challenges in new ways.

There is ample food for those who are hungry when we think about resources differently.

In the Presbyterian context, there is ample room for all, I believe, when we can move beyond win-lose scenarios and put ourselves back in that ancient story, when Jesus’ invitation is extended to all, and the disciples are surprised to learn just how much they already have – enough bread, enough fish, enough hope, enough room, enough love, enough grace, with leftovers to spare.

Hear Andrew King’s poem, “And Plenty for the Pilgrimage Home:”

“He came ashore into crowds:
the crowds with little peace
the crowds with little joy
the crowds with little hope

with hurts unnumbered
to bring to his caring

in a place like desert
a place like emptiness
a place of the aching heart

and the hour became late
and the shadows lengthened
and hunger was deeply felt.

Where shall crowds go
in this hour like emptiness,
in this time of warring,
in the gathering shadows of despair?

Where shall we buy
the hope that strengthens,
the love that nourishes,
the peace we so desperately need?

See how our baskets feel nearly empty,
how in our own hurting,
weariness and hunger
we believe we have little to give.

But hear, in the words
of the one who is kindness,
whose compassion reaches
beyond the setting sun,

the hope our hearts long for,
on which we can feed:

hear the invitation
to share even our weakness
for it contains the promise

that that there is no emptiness
where the Source of all life
does not flow;

that there is no place where
death's shadows are falling
where the Redeemer of life
does not go.

We can feed upon that promise,
promise of sufficiency,
promise of despair overcome –
feed upon grace that is fullness of joy.
We can share, eat, and be full.”

And there is plenty for the pilgrimage home. Amen.