Limited Resources; Unlimited Possibilities

Prayer for Illumination

God of compassion: Take pity on us. Speak to us in ways we can hear. Feed us with your word, that we might be healed of any faithlessness and strengthened in our discipleship. Amen.

Introduction to Scripture

Our text comes from Matthew. It is a story that is told by all four gospel writers. Therefore, it must be important, so listen up! Listen for God’s word to you: Matthew 14:13-21.

Sermon

It was a deserted place by the lake. Remote. Shadows were growing longer as the sun sank lower in the western sky. A huge crowd had assembled. They had been milling around all day because Jesus was there tending to their infirm. But now little kids were getting fussy. The disciples looked around at the rag tag throng—not exactly members of Galilee’s Who’s Who who could hop on steeds and return home quickly for dinner or order their servants to unpack their picnic spreads on linen tablecloths. These folks had come on foot. They were poor. They were tired. Some were sick. And now everyone needed a bite.

So the disciples approached Jesus. They had a plan. They were sensitive to the needs of the crowd. They knew the people were hungry. It was time for them to eat. But the disciples were also practical. “We’re out in the boondocks,” they said to Jesus. “It’s getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” This was a reasonable idea, they thought. The crowds would need to fend for themselves. Send them on their way.

But Jesus had other ideas. Jesus always seemed to have other ideas. “There’s no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.” At first they thought he was joking. But then they realized he was dead serious. Their jaws dropped. “You give them something to eat,” he had said.

“We’ve got nothing here but five biscuits and a couple of sardines.”

How could that possibly be enough?

• When the college graduate stares at a Mt. Everest of student loans he has accumulated, how can he take a low paying job working for a nonprofit? How can his salary possibly be enough to make it?
• When the nominating committee comes calling, asking you to take an important volunteer
position, you look at your schedule and think, “How can I possibly have the time to undertake this responsibility”?  

- When we consider an overwhelming community need, like decent housing or malnutrition or the cycle of poverty right here in Abbeville County, we think, “How can our church possibly make any difference with the limited resources we’ve got?”  

Our paltry five biscuits and two sardines cannot possibly be enough.  

Besides, since we have limited resources we cannot afford to give them up. Let them hire someone else. Let them find someone with more time. Let the poor fend for themselves. We better conserve what we have because we’re going to need it ourselves. What time, what talents, what money, what energy, what reserves we have, we better hang onto.  

Yet Jesus’ words hang in the air: “You give them something to eat.”  

How can you give when there just doesn’t seem to be enough?  

If the disciples had been paying attention that very day, they would have had their answer. If they had been watching Jesus they would have seen.  

By any human standards Jesus was depleted. He had just been rejected in Nazareth, his hometown. The folks there took offense at him. They didn’t understand him at all. Not only did they not get his preaching, he wasn’t able to do many deeds of power there. His ministry had flopped just where you would think it would have soared. Then, if that weren’t enough to drain a person, he had that morning gotten news of his cousin’s horrible death. His cousin John was in the same line as he was—the business of declaring God’s empire. But the empire of Rome had struck back. And it struck hard. Herod, the ruler of Galilee, had had John sent to prison because John inconveniently pointed out that Herod’s relationship with Herodias, his niece and wife of his half brother, was incestuous. And now, word came to Jesus that Herod had beheaded John because at his birthday party, doubtless thanks to a few glasses too many, Herod had foolishly promised Herodias’s daughter (after her dance of the seven veils) she could have anything she wanted. She had asked for John’s head on a platter.  

Sock in the gut, drained, depleted, Jesus had gotten in a boat by himself and steered toward this deserted place. His tank was empty. But he hadn’t even gotten out of his boat when the crowds materialized. They had gotten wind of his movement and beat him there.  

How could he possibly have anything to give them? Before you say, “But he was the Son of God,” you’ve got to say, “But he was human.” He was every bit as human as you or I.  

What did he do? Did he say, “Sorry, I better look after my own interests. Let me nurse my disappointment and grief first. Maybe I can serve you next year. Your problems are too overwhelming.”?  

No, he had compassion. He did not turn them away. They were hurting. They were wounded. They were lame, blind, diseased. And so he reached down into himself and gave. He laid his hands on them and healed them. He trusted that somehow, there would be enough of him to go around.  

If the disciples had been paying attention, maybe they would have realized that when you think you’re depleted, when you think there’s not enough, somehow, some way the Lord provides.  

It’s the same story, over and over. Things look bleak. There’s not enough of whatever you need but with God, there’s more than enough.
• The Israelites needed food and water after they crossed the Red Sea. They wandered in the wilderness where there was nada, nothing. Then God sent manna from heaven and water from a rock. Same story—our limited resources and God’s unlimited possibilities.

• The widow was in dire straits, down to her last stick of firewood, one handful of meal, one last drop of oil, barely enough for herself and her dying son when a foreigner showed on her doorstep and invited himself to supper and then proceeded to move in with them. But the meal didn’t give out and the jug of oil didn’t run dry. On top of it all, the stranger, Elijah, revived her son. Same story—our limited resources and God’s unlimited possibilities.

Over and over we look down and say, “There’s nothing here but five paltry biscuits and two measly sardines.” And then Jesus says to us, “Bring them here to me. Bring what resources you have to me.”

Nancy Lublin was in law school in 1997 when she received a $5,000 inheritance from her great grandfather. She didn’t sock it away for a rainy day. She didn’t use it to buy stuff for herself. She used it to honor her Poppy Max by helping others blaze new beginnings. New to New York and still a student, she established an organization with three nuns from Spanish Harlem to serve disadvantaged women. She called it Dress for Success. It’s still flourishing. Dress for Success provides professional attire and career development tools so women without the means to buy an outfit suitable for a job interview or the skills to land or keep a job, can thrive at work and in life. Five thousand dollars isn’t much to start a nonprofit with. But her investment has multiplied into Dress for Success outlets in 125 cities across fifteen countries. Thousands of volunteers donate clothes and time and money. Our youth group sorted and sized suits and separates at the Dress for Success located in Durham, NC last week.

“You give them something to eat.”

Nancy Lublin’s faithful offering of her inheritance has helped over 700,000 poor women work and put food on the table for their families.

A Presbyterian youth group right here in South Carolina offered about all teenagers have to offer: an idealistic idea and willingness to serve. They looked at the massive amounts of excitement, energy, and money spent in connection with the Super Bowl and thought, “What if even a fraction of that could be directed at something a lot more long-lasting and truly hope-giving than an afternoon football game?” On Super Bowl Sunday, they stood at the doors of their church with soup pots and asked people to give a dollar or a can of food to fight hunger and poverty right in their hometown of Columbia. The movement spread.

“You give them something to eat.”

Just this year, in 2014, over 7,000 youth groups (including ours) collected $8.3 million in cash and food items in The Souper Bowl of Caring.

But everything doesn’t have to be on a grand scale. Remember how Mother Teresa said, “Don’t look for big things. Just do small things with great love.”? One afternoon in Raleigh last week on the youth mission trip, we were assigned to go to a downtown church and pass out meal sacks which the church gives out each Wednesday to anyone who comes by. The sacks had an apple, a pop-top can of beanie weenies, a granola bar, and a bottle of water. We set up games of corn-hole toss and mancala in the courtyard and invited any of the meal-takers who wanted to join in. We had a cooler of popsicles there, too. One little woman was so delighted to get a popsicle. You know if you’re living on the streets, without a refrigerator, and it’s a hot July day, a popsicle can be a real treat. She thanked us profusely and declared, “Why, this is great. Ya
know, yesterday was my birthday.” Upon hearing that, our youth group broke out singing, “Happy Birthday” to her. She grinned ear to ear and suddenly seemed six feet tall. Getting a popsicle. Getting serenaded. She got fed by more than just that meal sack.

You know how the story ends. At the lakeside that late afternoon Jesus ordered the crowds to sit on the grass. What had been barren—a deserted, wilderness place—now had grass. They sat on the grass. Jesus then took what the disciples had and blessed it. Together they fed the crowd and even had leftovers.

But the story never ends. It’s the same story for us, too: limited resources; unlimited possibilities. “Bring your five biscuits and two sardines to me,” Jesus says. Then he takes them, says grace over them, and gives them back to us to give to those in need. And believe me, there’s always enough. When we reach down in ourselves and give compassionately, there’s always more than enough.