

Multiplication

Mark 6:30-44

One member of our Monday morning Bible study had a great insight into the Bible passage we just read. It is of course very familiar. In fact, it is one of the few things to appear in all four Gospels. Sometimes, when we read things we already know so well, we do not attend to them. Rather like reciting the Lord's Prayer, we do not really listen to the words. But this person was paying attention. And thinking. She said something like, "Perhaps the people who ran out from the 'all the towns' to listen to Jesus took food with them. Like a picnic. Would they have gone out to this 'lonely place' without making any preparations?" I find this to be a fascinating question. Put another way: among all those thousands of people did the disciples actually find only five loaves of bread and two fish? One way or another we know from earlier in Mark 6 that this event took place quite near the Sea of Galilee, one of the most fertile fishing grounds in the world.

The question of whether people came packed with picnic supplies does not undercut the miraculous nature of whatever happened on that day. Somehow Jesus made feeding thousands of people happen in an unlikely place. He multiplied whatever they already had and it became more than enough to satisfy them all. He still performs this miracle.

Just take a look at the church. We have actively participating members who started working with our youth programs over sixty years ago. Other active members have worked with youth over the ensuing years right up to today. How many young people has this church sent out in the world over those years? Of course, not all of them remain active in churches. Some do not even believe in Jesus as God, but I would wager many if not most of them do. Consider the exponential spread of the Good News of the Gospel as they get married, have children, make friends, work in communal work spaces. By word and by deed they testify to God to all those people. The loaves and fish multiply. I started my career as a youth pastor. I remained directly involved in youth ministry until we moved here five years ago. I will tell you a little secret: every adult sponsor I ever recruited did not believe he or she would make a good leader of youth. At least not at first. But God took those supposedly unqualified people and used them to make an impact on hundreds of lives.

Or think of missionary work. This congregation has done no direct evangelistic missionary work in quite some time. That is, we have not preached the Gospel to unbelievers in the hopes of helping them come into saving relationships with Jesus Christ. But we have given financial support to at least one man who has done a great deal of that, in some of the most dangerous places in the world to do so. I refer to William Seo. He sends a pictorial newsletter about once a month. Those who receive it have seen pictures of Muslims he has brought to Christ. With the return of the Taliban just over two years ago he closed his office in Kabul and ceased teaching Afghan women how to operate their own sewing shops. He turned his focus to getting

his employees and their families out of the country. He took 92 out to freedom.

The loaves and the fish get multiplied. A man who had thought his Army service as a medic was preparation for a career as a doctor instead received a calling from God. He went to seminary, passed his exams, and got ordained. After his Afghan sojourn, he flew with his 92 rescuees to Brazil, where most of them remain. They await visas to enter other countries, including here. Meanwhile, William heard the voice of God again, this time telling him to go to Zambia, a country in southeast Africa. There he resumed openly preaching and seeking to convert people to Christ. God used a man who never imagined doing this work—a man, I might add, operating in his second language (English) in places where he needs interpreters to communicate with just about everybody—and his persistence has driven him to great success. (And Central Presbyterian does also support other forms of mission, both financially and with volunteer hours.)

Or just think of the Presbytery. Draw a line from roughly Cincinnati to Dana, north of here. Every PC(USA) church south and west of that line belongs to the Ohio Valley Presbytery. Six or seven presbyteries in Indiana and Illinois in turn belong to the Synod of Lincoln Trails. The Synod One offers a great new program to its pastors. Any active pastor serving anywhere in those two states can apply for a grant. There is but one stipulation for the use of the awards to be made: pastors cannot use the money to do any work. They call it the Respite Grant. They encourage all pastors to apply; they have a deep pocket donor backing it. I have sent in my application. If I do

indeed receive a grant I intend to take some vacation days, and Linda, and go someplace sunny in the dead of winter. Any reading I do then will be spy novels.

Our passage from Mark begins with Jesus' disciples returning from their first mission. He had commissioned them to out into the surrounding towns, preaching, teaching and healing. Now they "returned to Jesus and told him all they had done and taught." He responds by offering them a respite. "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." They try. They get into a boat and start crossing part of the Sea of Galilee. But crowds have started massing and following Jesus everywhere he goes. Standing along the shore, they see where the boat is headed. By the time they land, Jesus' group is already surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands, of people. I imagine two reactions, one from the disciples, who must feel exasperated at their loss of a mini-vacation. The other reaction comes from Jesus, who, Mark tells us, "had compassion on them." And he resumes teaching them.

With the approaching darkness comes the disciples' second chance to get free of the crowds. They *are* in a lonely place. There are no Krogers within miles. So the disciples urge Jesus to send the people into the towns and villages to buy themselves something to eat. Jesus counters with, "You give them something to eat." Jesus commonly said things that seem self-contradictory or impossible. The rule of thumb we need to use for these is that he used figures of speech to make his followers think—and maybe even learn a thing or two. In this case he appears to be setting all his witnesses, disciples and crowds alike, up for a miracle with a lesson attached to it.

Whether enough people came carrying picnic baskets to feed all of them, or whether they had brought enough to help Jesus with his miraculous multiplication, or whether he really did use just five loaves and two fish for his starter set, all four Gospels tell us 5,000 *men* (not counting the women and children sure to be parts of the crowds) had plenty to eat. In fact—and here comes part of the lesson Jesus wishes to teach—after supper they gathered up enough leftover scraps to fill twelve baskets. Question, would not at least twelve people have brought food of their own? Why else would they have those baskets out in that lonely place? Twelve is, along with three and forty, a number with symbolic value in the Bible. The twelve sons of Jacob, who in turn sired the twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve disciples. Every person there that day would have immediately taken the reference. Jesus provides more than enough to satisfy *everybody*, body and soul, stomach and spirit.

We mentioned missions other than evangelism we support. And we mentioned that we have a number of people who support them with volunteer hours. Here is just a sampling of how different ones of us do this. (I do not mean to try to mention them all, so please excuse me I leave out some way in which you serve.) Working at Manna from Seven, 14th and Chestnut, or building ramps for wheelchair bound people to exit and enter their homes. Reading to elementary school students in classrooms around town where our members are teachers. Taking meals to our own shut-ins and those temporarily laid low by illness or surgery. Assisting the pastor in serving home communion to the same folks. Supporting our Youth Director with Highpoint Youth. Teaching Sunday school. Doing Children's Moments. Advocating for justice and wise

policies at the school board, or wherever.

The main point of this second stewardship sermon for 2023 is Jesus gives that we may give. He gives us our talents, interests and even time itself. He encourages us to join him in multiplying those gifts by using them in his name. We need not name him as we do so. About half a dozen people in this church gave significant time and energy to resettling Afghans during Operation Heart. We were required by our partner organization, Church World Service, through whom we received our referrals of refugees, *not* to use the name Jesus. Out loud. But those Afghans remain in our prayers.

And of course we can give money, too. One of the members of our Interpretation and Support Committee has recently, twice in my hearing, thanked God this church has a good track record of stewarding the money you entrust to it. I agree wholeheartedly. You can trust this congregation's leadership to use wisely. So I ask you to pray and to think about supporting our work here even more generously than you are already doing. As Brad Bough said last Sunday, while our worship participation has fallen off post-pandemic, we thank God your giving has not diminished. Please, continue to give, that together we might multiply those gifts, in service to Jesus and to all God's people. Thank you.