

“Plenty of Room”
Matthew 14:13-21
Lent II: Body and Belonging
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Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

As we continue our journey through Lent with *This Here Flesh* by Cole Arthur Riley, we go from the lofty place of considering wonder and calling through the creation stories in Genesis to the practical, relatable story about people who are hungry. And what is more Lenten than living in that tension?—a season set aside for getting up close and personal with our mortality while also knowing that there is a backdrop of cosmic significance to Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem.

This story, the feeding of the 5000, is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels. *Something* about this story, *something* about this version of Jesus, was so important that all four gospel authors included it in their telling of the Good News.

Some of the more literal folks among us may be hear this story read and think, “yeah, right. Food multiplied before our very eyes? Nope.” And when we hear the staggering numbers of people in this story, that makes sense! The five loaves and two fish were barely enough to feed Jesus and his twelve disciples—so how were the five thousand men, and probably another five thousand women and a few thousand children going to share all of that?!

In our minds, crunching those numbers, we think: there were simply not enough resources to go around! Not enough loaves. Not enough fish. Far too many people. And in the center of it all, a prophet recently grieving the violent death of his cousin at the hands of local authorities colluding with Empire. In this context, we may not be surprised that Jesus and his disciples were not the prime examples of a strategic food distribution program.

The disciples (and again I’ll say “bless their hearts”) are deeply relatable in this story. They were feeling the impact of the assassination of John the Baptist, too, probably on high alert for Jesus’ safety at this point. They were probably tired and grieving, wanting to have some alone time with Jesus to check in with him and figure out a plan for going forward with the ministry. The disciples were clearly worried about the wellbeing of all the people following them—all five or ten thousand plus! The disciples probably felt responsible for the crowds of people—after all, they were part of Jesus’ ministry that was attracting all the people. The disciples were looking for a solution for the scarcity problem.

At this point in the story, we remember the Hebrew Bible’s story of the miracle of manna in the wilderness, falling from the sky like snow, providing sustenance when the Israelites needed it the most. They, like the disciples and crowds in this story, were in the wilderness, traditionally seen

as a place of uncertainty, temptation and danger, a liminal place where the regular rules of society don't apply.¹ The Israelite wanderers' time in the desert came between their bondage in enslavement in Egypt and their deliverance to the land that God had promised them. The wandering time had been, for them, a time to figure out who they were as a people and to create norms and rules for behavior that would set them apart from others. For Jesus and his companions, this time in the wilderness comes between the grief of losing a family member to the Roman Empire's thirst for power, and, for the gospel writer, the salvation that would come through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jesus certainly knew the story of heavenly manna as he looked up into heaven and blessed and broke the bread. He certainly knew that story as he said, "look again, I think you'll find that we have what we need right here." He certainly knew, from his Jewish tradition, that this wilderness time was also a time of becoming, and that the experiences in the wilderness would shape his movement going forward.

At the risk of allegorizing too easily, we are the disciples in this story. We look around in our homes or in our lives, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our country and world and we see shortcomings everywhere: not enough food, not enough space, not enough housing, not enough money, not enough land, not enough jobs, not enough time. With the insidiousness of capitalism whispering about scarcity in our ears, we may feel like we have to scoop it all up, figure out how to be first, best, how to get the most and make the most, how to hold on to what we have amidst the threats from outside.

The scarcity mindset is so tempting, isn't it? It makes sense. In a way, this mindset is one of the most USAmerican ways of thinking there is: more is better, less is worse. I want to have more than my neighbor, more than my friends, so I can feel superior. I want to secure my own wellbeing before helping anyone else—that is, if I know that they have exhausted all their resources. I must strive for independence and personal security and profit, because I can't count on anyone else to take care of me. There's not enough to go around, so I better grab what I can and hold on tight. Hear the pronouns I just used: "I," "me," "my." Not very much "us" or "we."

But Jesus shows us another way to be. As he travels and teaches and preaches, he lives a vision of a community based on collective flourishing. He tells about a kin-dom that is not like any that anyone had ever visited, or that anyone had even heard of, as Godly Play tells it. This kin-dom was one that was characterized by abundance and enough-ness, not by scarcity, and perhaps even the more dangerous sibling, the fear of scarcity.

¹ Working Preacher, Jennifer T Kaalund <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18/commentary-on-matthew-1413-21>.

As the disciples bring their worries to Jesus, they say they have “nothing,” “only five loaves and two fish.” But Jesus, making real the kin-dom of heaven right then and there, sees what they need to feed everyone. What they needed was right there. When the disciples say “this won’t work, we only have *this* much,” Jesus answers, “actually, let me show you how much you *do* have.” He changes their perspectives.

Have you ever experienced a surprising abundance? For me, I think of Peace Community Church of Oberlin, Ohio (the church that last week’s guest preacher Rev. Davi Weasley and I both attended a few years apart). Peace Church was really good at potlucks. I’m talking: everyone contributed, family recipes were shared, the serving table was always crammed with casseroles and pot roast and vegetable sides and Midwest “salads.” I remember that church, and specifically those potlucks, as a place of abundance, a place where the kin-dom of God was made real among and through us, a place where all could be fed and there was always enough room at the table.

But it wasn’t a big church. Maybe 40 members, maybe 35 people on a Sunday. The building wasn’t fancy—sometimes bats got in the balcony and the pipes froze in the northeastern Ohio winter. But when those potlucks happened—up to a hundred folks from the college and town would cram into the church basement. Inevitably someone would say, “uh oh, there’s a lot of people here. I don’t think there’s enough food for everyone.” And always, a church member would respond with a small smile, “We have enough. There’s plenty of room at the table.”

And there always was.

How did that work? To tell you the truth, I’m not sure. But it did. That odd way of counting that my former professor Dr. Amy-Jill Levine calls “Jesus math.” There was always plenty of room and always enough to go around.

And in this world, did you know that there is enough food to feed the whole human population? The world’s farmers produce enough food to feed 1.5 times the human population!² But between one third and one half of all food produced globally is wasted,³ when it could go to the estimated 828 million people who are hungry.⁴ Did you know there is also enough medicine and medical expertise, but over 2 billion people do not have access to essential medicines and vaccines?⁵

²https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241746569_We_Already_Grow_Enough_Food_for_10_Billion_People_and_Still_Can't_End_Hunger

³ <https://olioex.com/food-waste/the-problem-of-food-waste/#:~:text=Between%2033%2D50%25%20of%20all,is%20worth%20over%20%241%20trillion.>

⁴ <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/the-hunger-crisis/world-hunger-facts/>

⁵ <https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2020.00035>

What if we could distribute it to those who need it without being concerned about turning a profit? With these life-or-death situations, we don't have a scarcity problem. We have a distribution problem. Our society needs to do some of that "Jesus math" (it also goes by the name of equitable distribution of resources) and figure out how to break out of the scarcity mindset that plagues so much of our world.

What about when it comes to the church? Surely we don't fall into that scarcity mindset?!

Friends, I have heard some in this community say "how come we don't have more of [insert people group here]?" or "we don't have enough young adults to do X, Y, Z" or "if only more kids came to Sunday school, then we could..." or "if only our church building had [these amazing features], then it'd be just like the golden age of the 1950s." Dear ones, hear me say this with love, for you and for our church, that all of those comments come from a scarcity mindset. We are blessed to have a beautiful, compassionate congregation. We are blessed with growing diversity in our membership across many categories. We are blessed with individuals and families who care for each other by sharing their lives and resources with each other. So perhaps, like the disciples, the fear of scarcity is actually more dangerous for this church than scarcity itself.

That fear can lead us to a "grass-is-greener" type of thinking that finds meaning only in comparing ourselves to others. Not only do we wish to be like them, over there, but we find ourselves discounting what we have and who we are right now.

But it's hard to escape the fear of scarcity. Worry creeps in. Churches worry about membership, about money—and about the membership and money of a church down the street. We are afraid of becoming irrelevant, afraid of fading into nothing, afraid of death, afraid of losing our self-importance, afraid of losing our power and privilege and status. When we focus on the things we do not have, and compare ourselves to those we perceive to have more than us, thinking they are better than us because they do have more (or that we are better than someone else because we have more), we lose focus of the fact that we have what we need right here.

"Where two or three are gathered" is a saying because it is true—it doesn't take fifty or five hundred or five thousand people for the presence of the Holy to be felt. We have an abundance right where we are—with the people here, the resources we have right now, the space we have as it is, the ideas and passion and love and experience we have right now. Just because our youth group doesn't have forty kids does not mean that we do not have incredible, thoughtful, strong, compassionate, wise youth among us who are ready to lead us into the next generation. Just because we do not have standing-room-only Sunday services does not mean that we are not providing spiritual meaning or a theological home or an inclusive and supportive community to the people who are here. Our salvation is not gained through numbers.

And so too, those five little loaves and those two humble fish were enough, when viewed with a kin-dom perspective. There was plenty of room at that table, as the disciples passed around the baskets to feed all the men, women and children who had followed Jesus into the wilderness. In fact, there was so much left over from the meal that twelve baskets of leftovers were collected after everyone had eaten their fill! What an extravagant love and amazing blessing, that leads to that much abundance. As homiletician Dock Hollingsworth wrote in one commentary, “Jesus transforms our humble offerings into more than we could have dreamed, but it is also true that Jesus is calling upon us to dream bigger. Jesus did not say, ‘give me those fish and that bread, and I will feed them.’ his first call was for the disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world.”⁶

As I am praising a mindset of abundance, I want to be clear that I am not calling for us to adopt an apathetic attitude, one of resting on our laurels because we are secure in having twelve baskets left over. Yes, leave behind the thoughts that are pre-programmed to see scarcity, but also do not become so content with the knowledge of enough-ness that we become ruthlessly frugal or ignorantly wasteful. No, what this story is calling for is for us to take stock of the resources we have and use them well, steward them well. Jesus’ wise use of bread and fish—for the sustenance of the people, as a sign of sacred Love—did not give into the scarcity mindset of the disciples. There was no *“that group over there has money to buy food”* comparison. There was no *“if only we had so much more fish and so much more bread.”* Jesus shows us a different pattern. He invites the people to take a seat, to make their bodies comfortable, to adopt a posture of rest. He takes hold of the resources they have. He looks to heaven. He breaks the bread. He blesses it.

Then, he gives it to the disciples and they are the ones that feed the multitude. Jesus provides for the abundance, but the disciples are the ones who hand it out.⁷ Imagine their experience of this time—from being skeptical of what they do have to being partners in distributing the abundance of love to over ten thousand people. Amazing, and possible through their collaboration with the Holy’s work in the world. And friends, this is what we are called to do as followers of the Way of Jesus today! What a miracle, according to one commentator, “that God calls us to be disciples—to be the means through which God’s work is done in our world today.”⁸

⁶ Feasting on the Word: Year A, Homiletical Perspective by Dock Hollingsworth.

⁷ Feasting on the Word: Year A, Pastoral Perspective on this text by Clifton Kirkpatrick.

⁸ Feasting on the Word: Year A, Pastoral Perspective on this text by Clifton Kirkpatrick.

Beloveds, there is plenty of food, plenty of room, plenty of love to go around. There is always more room at this table. As Cole Arthur Riley writes, “I don’t know much about heaven, but I have no reason to believe it won’t be made right here.”⁹ May it ever be so. Amen.

Benediction

Dear church, there is plenty of room here: at the table, in our hearts, in our church; plenty of room for dreaming, for curiosity, for growth and learning; plenty of room for us to be our whole selves, beautiful and diverse and amazingly complex. Cole Arthur Riley wrote this in her chapter on Belonging: “We don’t just welcome you or accept you; we need you. We are insufficient without you.”¹⁰ Let us rededicate ourselves, each day in this season of Lent and beyond, to making room at the table for each other, in all the many identities and experiences that make us who we are. And together, let us dedicate ourselves to pulling up more chairs, more tables, more picnic blankets, for all who need to be fed. May it ever be so. Go in peace.

⁹ This Here Flesh, p. 58.

¹⁰ This Here Flesh, p. 73.