

“Manna Distributors of Fairmont Presbyterian Church”

Matthew 14:13-21

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This story of feeding a hungry crowd reminds me of another story found in the Old Testament. The children of Israel are on their journey towards the Promised Land having narrowly escaped the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. As they make their way through the desert they experience the first real pangs of hunger. What do they do? They begin to complain to Moses and Aaron, “why did you bring us out of Egypt to die of hunger out here in the wilderness? Even though we were enslaved in Egypt we were well fed.” Exodus chapter 16 tells us, “Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instructions or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So the Israelites would not have to work gathering food on the Sabbath, God provided a two day supply on the sixth day.

God promised to provide for the Israelites in the desert and God did. God rained bread from heaven – called manna—and quail in the evening so they would have meat. God provided, God’s children received. All the Israelites had to do was pick up the bread every morning and the quail in the evening. God put them to the test to see if they would follow God’s instructions. If they tried to hoard the manna--not quite convinced God would provide for them the next day—the manna became wormy. Day in and day out, they lived with the test – would God continue to provide for their hunger?

When Jesus’ disciples were faced with a hungry crowd in today’s gospel story it is very likely they remembered how God had provided for their ancestors in the wilderness. It is likely they expected Jesus to do the same. “Rain down bread from heaven or from somewhere – after all you are the Son of God, DO Something!”

It is the disciples that are put to the test in this story. Will they use the meager resources at hand to feed the large crowd around them? Will they trust God to provide even though common sense tells them they will come up short? Their test is this—will they participate in God’s divine meeting of needs through Jesus or send

the crowd home hungry? The disciples might have been skeptical their meager supply of food would satisfy the large crowd, but at Jesus' meal there are leftovers.

It is a different test than the ones the Israelites faced. God provided food for the Israelites in the desert. All they had to do was gather it up. In the New Testament story, Jesus does not feed the crowd rather he empowers the disciples to use the resources at hand, blesses the meager resources and with them the multitude is fed. The disciples become co-laborers with Jesus as they help meet the crowd's hunger. There are numerous times in the New Testament where the circumstances and needs are different but the bottom line is the same. Jesus inviting people to become a part of His mission. Jesus inviting people to become co-laborers with him accomplishing God's will for the world. "They need not go away, you give them something to eat", Jesus said. The disciples do so and learn that God continues to provide.

It looks so easy for the Israelites as God drops manna and quail right in their campsite. Don't we sometimes wish God would act in a similar fashion in our lives . . .

- drop in our laps a sizeable check to cover financial needs or
- drop in our laps a job or
- drop in our laps the solution to a difficult situation?

Jesus' disciples learned that God sometimes provides through divine intervention as God did dropping food in the Israelites' campsite and sometimes God provides through the assistance of others.

It seems this lesson of whether or not we trust God to provide is a lesson often repeated for Jesus' disciples. This lesson is also repeated for the church because the church is always in the desert, in the place where it cannot rely upon its own resources. The church is hungry and it is surrounded by a world of deep hunger, people who are lonely, hungry and poor in many different ways. Faced with tremendous amounts of need, the church sees only the dwindling numbers on the membership roles and even smaller ones in the mission budget. Isn't it tempting for the church to echo the cry of Jesus' disciples, "This is a desert. Send the crowds away to fend for themselves." (Mt. 14:15)

This sermon is not meant to dismiss the need for being good stewards of our resources or the need for a balanced budget. We, as a church, need to be good stewards of our resources. The scripture

passage, however, is primarily about trust not stewardship. Will we trust God to provide as we fulfill God's will?

Jesus is still teaching and there is a lesson for disciples and the church to learn: God is compassionate and abundantly able to provide. With desperate, hungry people camped all over the church lawn, Jesus turns, then and now, to his followers and says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." In the Gospel story, the disciples, fully aware they lack enough resources, do something completely miraculous—some might even say crazy—they trust Jesus.

Let me tell you another story. It is also a story about some of Jesus' disciples trusting him to meet the needs of the surrounding crowd. It is a story about Jesus' disciples known as Honey Creek Presbyterian Church in New Carlisle. It is the church I pastored before coming to Fairmont. The church was surrounded by a growing community of Hispanic children. These children were spiritually hungry for God's Word, hungry for the message they were valuable children of God, hungry to hear they matter. The church's bare bones Christian Education budget was the equivalent of a few loaves and fishes in the midst of a multitude of children yearning to be fed. The Christian Education committee heard Jesus say, in essence, "They need not go away, you give them something to eat." Meager resources in hand, the committee chose to trust Jesus and forge ahead with Vacation Bible School to feed hungry children the Word of God.

Meanwhile, Sugar Creek Presbyterian Church heard about Honey Creek's VBS plans. Their pastor told Honey Creek's pastor—me at the time—"We have curriculum we will gladly share with you. In fact, you can have all the props from our Beach Party VBS. We have surfboards, bamboo torches, a life preserver, backdrops for the Bible stories, and scripture verses on poster board to display. Their Christian Educator said, "We had lots of craft supplies and stuff left over that I am sending. Supplies to make door hangers, prayer pails, sea shell bottles to fill with colored sand, bucket hats, sunglasses, plastic flower leis, visors . . . It was a van load full of supplies and props. It was an abundant feast of VBS supplies!

Then a member of the Baptist Church in New Carlisle saw Honey Creek's VBS advertising and called. "We did a similar VBS and may have something that would be useful. Come check out our supplies and take what you need." More supplies flowed in.

Honey Creek Church's Christian Education team started out with less than five loaves and two fish to feed the crowd. When VBS was over they had plenty of leftovers – about twelve baskets full.

It is the same opportunity given over and over and over, first to the Israelites, then to Jesus' disciples, to the entire Body of Christ and specifically to disciples within Fairmont Presbyterian Church. The opportunity is this.

Will we use the resources at hand, meager or not so meager, to feed the hungry crowd around us? Will we trust God to provide even though common sense tells us we will come up short? Will we participate with God in meeting needs or will we send the crowd home hungry? Amen.