Nu’uanu Congregational Church

August 1, 2020

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

*“Deacons”* Jeannie D. Thompson

The first thing I want us to notice is the last line of the passage: *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Last Wednesday evening, the Bible Study group had quite a “hoot” over the way in which the woman and children were mentioned. To reiterate: there were five thousand *only* if you do NOT count the women and children—lots more if you do.

Although I do wish the women and children had been included in the count, I am at least glad they were mentioned…*at all!*

What this means to me is that the women and children were not completely ignored. Matthew was not quite able to overcome his culture which did not value women and children the way we do today. However, he came as close as he could. He was not blind to their existence. He did see them, and that is an important bit of progress that we have been building on ever since.

Being able to see people—all people, the ones we like, and even the ones we do not like; the ones we understand, and even the ones that confuse us—every day is a new opportunity to see *all* of God’s beloved people. Every day is a new opportunity to love and serve them the way Christ saw us and made it his life’s work to serve, to care for, to help and attend to all of God’s people, especially those in need.

In this particular passage—which is one of the most famous passages from the Bible—what most of us notice and remember is how out of a meager provision came amazing abundance. From five loaves and a couple of fish many more than five thousand were fed. The Bible says “all ate and were filled.”

In my ministry here in Hawaii and on the mainland, wherever I have had the honor of celebrating Holy Communion with a loaf that I actually had people come up and break off a piece from, what usually happened was that each person would try to break off the smallest piece they could. Sometimes, I would watch as people would break off such a tiny, little piece that it looked like a crumb, a little pinch of bread between their fingers.

There were so many times I longed to stand there breaking off great, big hunks of bread for each person, more than they could scarf down before they got back to their pew. I longed to grab those big red cups that Solo makes and fill them with…grape juice—no, not wine, not at 9 o’clock on a Sunday morning!

I longed to give them so much that they would have to carry it back to their pew, sitting there with their Holy Snack, munching and discovering just how generous God wants to be with us.

Really…the things we notice.

So, here are the two things we have from this familiar and beloved story: first, that *all* the people were noticed, even if only the men were actually counted.

Second, when Christ blessed the provisions they *did* have—as meager as they were—there was enough to all of them to eat; enough for every last person to eat their fill until they were satisfied.

The third thing I want us to notice is that Christ did his part: he blessed the bread and the fish. However, it was *not* Christ who took the food out and distributed it to the people. He had the disciples do what he had originally *told* them to do—it was the *disciples* who were given the task of looking into the eyes of each person, and putting the bread and fish in their hands.

As you may remember: at the beginning, the disciples were ready to send the people away. There were just too many of them think of feeding themselves. “We cannot do this,” they said. “We don’t have enough ourselves. Let’s send them back to the towns we passed so they can feed themselves.”

What the disciples originally noticed was how little they had and how much was needed—more than their own capacity to provide.

But then Jesus took what there was, and he blessed it. After he did this, however, it was still up to the disciples to feed the people. So, they took what God and Christ had blessed and went out among the people.

*And all of them ate and were filled.*

That is the sum of it. This is what I believe we are called to notice: we are called to notice people and their needs—*all* people.

We are also called on to believe that we have been blessed by a God who knows only abundance. Ours is a God who knows that when it comes to filling the needs of people it is never about scarcity; it’s about *distribution­.* So long as God has done God’s part, our part is to figure out to get it all distributed.

However, it all starts with noticing the world and the people around us.

Last week, I got a text from a man named Mike Walsh. Mike and Eliza Walsh just moved here to Honolulu a couple of months ago with their two daughters—Kana and Ari. Both of the girls have joined the Scouts, and I know them because they joined the troop that meets here at our church.

Last week, Ari had a letter published to the editor of Civil Beat. She wrote to the news site about an idea she had.

Apparently, Ari had noticed a group of city workers trimming the coconut trees in a park. She saw how the coconuts themselves were mulched right along with the branches and other debris, and she began to wonder if those coconuts could be put to better use—perhaps even helping to feed hungry people.

The thing is: Ari did not just wonder, she started making calls. She called the Department of Parks and learned that there was no policy in place to make use of the coconuts, nor was there any reason not to (ie. the city would not lose anything to make good use of the coconuts). She also called the Hawaii Foodbank to see if they would be willing to accept such a donation. They said they would if they could be sorted and cleaned.

So, there is still more work to do on such an idea, but at least someone had it.

Someone who saw hunger, and saw available food that is going to waste. Ari Walsh saw the abundance God had already provided and she saw an opportunity to touch other peoples’ lives in good and nourishing ways.

By now, some of you are wondering why I chose to call this sermon, “Deacons.”

It is because I was reminded of how the whole tradition of deacons came about in the church. It happened not too long after Christ had ascended and the disciples were left on their own here on earth. Apparently, the disciples were trying to do everything—preach, evangelize, and the many other duties of the ministry. They even served the people who were coming to them at the common table they all shared.

Finally, there came a day when they realized they could not do it all. They had to give-up at least one of the tasks they had been doing. They decided to turn over the task of serving people at the table to other volunteers. These people became known as deacons—literally, waiters.

I can’t help but wonder if they remembered that day with Jesus when more than five thousand people were fed. I wonder if they remembered the blessing that we can experience when we show compassion to others. I wonder if they hoped the deacons they appointed would see the same blessing they had and be inspired to greater faith.

Most of all, I wonder if they hoped that from then on, more and more people would see and notice all that is around them—the people in need, but also the abundance and blessing of God.

I know this is what I hope for myself and for all of us: that we will become—all of us—deacons; people who notice other people and who dedicate ourselves to serving as we have been served. I pray that we will be people who will believe in the abundance God has already provided and dedicate ourselves to finding better and better ways in which to distribute all of that abundance.

Finally, I give thanks for the stories we have of Jesus and the way in which he showed us God’s abundance and then set us the blessed task of seeing to its distribution. And I am glad that this lesson continues to inspire us even to this day, and I look forward to working along side all of you as we discover, together, how God is calling us to be good deacons among God’s beloved people.

Amen.