TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Traveling Feast* Matthew 14:13-21

Throughout the gospels, Jesus accomplishes many amazing and wonderful things. We call them miracles. They are deeds of power, of course. However, when we look a bit more closely, what we notice is that, more than anything else, they are Jesus’ expressions of deep and abiding compassion and love.

This is the discipleship into which we are called—no matter where or who we are. Even in a deserted place that does not look hopeful, even if our own lives look deserted and unhopeful, we are still invited to go with Jesus as he takes his miracle of feasting with him among a hungry, hurting world.

The miracle of the feeding of five thousand men, *besides women and children* [v.21]*,* is certainly one of those miracles. It is also certainly an expression of Jesus’ compassion. In fact, this miracle is such a clear illustration of Jesus’ compassion that it is the only miracle that all four-gospel writers recorded in their gospel.

As for the miracle itself: we are left to wonder about the physical aspects of it. Most of us take it for granted, and do not need an explanation. We only know that the gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—all were so deeply impressed with this miracle, *in particular,* that they included it in their writing.

However, in recent years, many writers and preachers have found it important to *logically* *explain* how such a thing could happen. How *could* such meager provisions accomplish such an amazing feat?

Some have suggested that when settled down onto the grass, the people saw Jesus’ great desire to put them at ease, and that is what prompted them to respond to him by bringing out the snacks and the bundled lunches that they had been carrying with them all along.

This is, indeed, quite logical and not unexpected. Most of us will note that where there is a mother and children, there will also be snacks. And so, many of us can well imagine the ancient, Hebrew equivalent of little containers of *cheerios, or raisins,* or cookies, or some such thing, being brought out and shared.

The suggestion is that the real miracle was the way in which the multitude of people were inspired to share with each other—with complete strangers, in many cases. They shared with them the food they had brought along for themselves. The generosity of the people became the miracle.

There is a lot of goodness in that thought. However, when I look at this passage—and the others that recount the feeding of a multitude of people, what I see first and foremost is Jesus’ desire to meet the needs of the people. What I see is *his* desire and provision for human beings. What I see is *God’s* great love and concern for human wellbeing, for our thriving by being fed. This is what is meant to be impressed on our hearts and our minds.

As one commentor has observed: [This story] *is an encapsulation of provision and the poignancy of need. Sometimes we forget that to be provided for and to have our needs met are indeed miraculous moments themselves.*

The “poignancy of need.” In this case: hunger felt, observed, and met. In stark and simple terms: Jesus saw hunger, and his deepest desire in that moment was to make sure that those in need received what they needed.

At this point, it is important that we notice is that the first thing Jesus does is he turns to the disciples. They were the ones who brought the situation to his attention, in the first place. And this was a good start—that they, too, had noticed the needs of the people.

However, their expectation was that the people needed to solve this problem for themselves and by themselves. [S]*end the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves,* [v.15] they tell Jesus.

This is a sensible, logical solution, but it is not *Jesus’* solution. His solution involves not only noticing there is need. Jesus’ solution is that noticing also requires the faithful person to *respond* to human need with *human involvement*, so that discipleship becomes more than a matter of following. It involves more than “lip service” to an ideal. Discipleship is also about participating in the work of God in caring for human need.

And Jesus signals this requirement with one pointed phrase, *“They need not go away;* [he says] *you give them something to eat.”* [v. 16]

In other words, *you do it*.

At first, the disciples are at a loss. Then Jesus acts. He takes what they have and he blesses it. Then he gives the loaves and fish *back* to the disciples to distribute, to share among the hungry people. And it is enough.

Now, you have either heard me say it before in a sermon, or maybe it was said by another preacher, or you have read the information for yourself somewhere, if not, here is the truth about hunger in this world of ours: *it is possible, here and today, to feed every man, woman, and child in the whole world*.

You heard that correctly: hunger is a completely solvable problem. The real issue is distribution—or rather: the obstacles to distribution. And I am not talking about *equitable* distribution. That would be great, but the world does not have to be perfectly equal in all its expressions in order for people everywhere to at least have enough, so they do not starve—and that would be a start.

I believe that what we do need is to come to grips with the notion that what we see around us, and who we see around us—both people and possessions—all have been created by God and all have been blessed by God. And if we really believe this, then our question becomes: how do we treat the things and the people whom God has touched?

In the area of hunger: how do we find more and better ways to distribute food to hungry people? How do we get it into their hands and into their bellies?

When asked these questions, most of us will remember one of the most recent stories in the news: that Russia has gone back on its commitment to allowing grain shipments out of Ukrainian ports. The markets for that grain are mostly in the Horn of Africa. What this means is that, in coming months, many more people in that part of the world are going to starve. It means that many of the people around the world who are barely making it are going to find it more difficult to live and to thrive.

The bad news is that you and I are not in a direct position to open those trading lines or engage in the geopolitical negotiations around this issue, and this can make us all feel frustrated and hopeless.

We may feel very much like Jesus’ first disciples who noted that they were all out in the middle of nowhere, in *“a deserted place, and the hour is now late*.*”* [v.15] How on earth were they going to feed so many with what little?

When we are thinking and feeling this way, remember this point: it did not matter to Jesus that there was little to work with. He took what there was. It did not matter to Jesus that the disciples themselves doubted that they had the resources to feed the people. Jesus still included them in his plan. Despite their doubt, he engaged them, and people were fed.

Likewise, we are not left out of the work of feeding people and bringing wholeness into the lives all around the world. We can do our part in this mission.

Our good news—and this is the most important part—our good news is that we can continue to support and strengthen a culture of caring right here, where we live, and this can and does touch other circles, greater circles of power. We can be influencers—even right here, in our own way, in our own context.

You know some of the ways we are already doing that: Family Promise, the Hawaii Foodbank, partnering with the YMCA for a preschool and recreational activities for children and youth, these are just some of the things we are doing. There is so much more we have done, too.

However, we can do more. We can also strengthen our presence in the community with activities like the one that was held here on our church campus just yesterday. We had people coming to us for a bazaar and a car wash, but it was much more than that.

The proceeds from yesterday’s Green Day will benefit a charity in our community. More than that: it was an opportunity to recycle a lot of used household items—things that might have gone into the landfill.

For the Scouts and all the people who came to shop and to have their car washed, all of that is part of our identity in their experience. Should any one of them want to stage a similar event or support a similar cause, they just may think of us as a partner—just as Jesus brought the disciples into partnership with him as he blessed and fed.

And that is the whole point of this miracle: that Jesus never fails to see the needs of the people, and that he never fails to include us into the work that blesses and feeds.

Whether people are literally being fed with good and wholesome food, or whether their minds are being fed with open education, or whether people’s physical needs are being cared for—wounds bound up, minds and spirits being healed and made whole—Jesus sees all of this, and requires that we see it too and find in our own way, in our own context, how to create or support a culture of caring.

Friends, the world continues to issue challenges to us about what is possible. The world continues to issue challenges to human safety and thriving.

Our good news is that Jesus’ Spirit is still here with us; still blessing and offering us his powerful compassion. Jesus’ spirit is still here with us, inspiring us and making us more creative than we ever dreamed possible, in order to respond to more and more people, in more and more ways. So I pray we continue to reach out and receive his blessing, may we reach out and receive his spirit, and may we continue to do our part to bless others in his name. May this be so. Amen.