

Leftovers and Still More

“And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” -- Matthew 14:20

Prayer: *Holy God, we come this morning to be with you, to sit together in your presence, and to listen for the word you have for us. Silence in us any voice but your own, and help us to know again the power of your redeeming love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

As we watch the evening news, we are bombarded with images of battlefields, terrorism, violence, disease, starvation, unemployment, debt default, and you name it. With the increase in our communication technology, just maybe we are being over-dosed by the “media drug.” I know one spouse who is absolutely convinced that her husband is addicted to the news ... right Ellen!

In times gone past, when people heard about a problem or disaster, their first reaction would be to ask, “What can we do to help?” Yet, now we watch the evening news and there is just too much there. We see a story from Afghanistan or Oslo and then from New York City, or even Phoenix and we are pushed beyond our capacity to internalize the message. The news details move us to communication overload and we respond by doing nothing. At 6:28 p.m. a collective sigh of relief can be heard across our community and we move to the *Wheel of Fortune* and passively ignore all that has happened. That is unless you are prepared for the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*.

We click-off the news and figure there is nothing we can do.

Then, on a beautiful Sunday morning at the end of July, we come to church and listen to the story from the *Gospel of Matthew*. The scene pictures a huge crowd gathered with 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Biblical scholars estimate that there could easily have been 10,000 or 12,000 people on that hillside. By late in the day these 10,000 or more were a hungry crowd. The disciples came to Jesus and said, “It’s really nice that you helped all those people today. But if you haven’t noticed, it’s after five o’clock and we need to quit. Would you please send all these people away, so that we could have a little peace and quiet?”

Instead, Jesus suggests that the people could use something to eat. The disciples respond, “Jesus, are you crazy? Look at how many people are here. All we have are five lousy pieces of bread and two fish. If the people are hungry, there is a McDonald’s just over that hill and a Denny’s in the next village. After all, you’ve done your job for the day. Now get rid of them.”

Too often that is the attitude of Christians. Congregations of good church people so easily see themselves as providing spiritual things. But when it comes to anything more for those in need, they try to get people to go away. Instead of dealing with hungry people, churches tell them where the food pantry is and how they can sign-up for food stamps. Instead of dealing with people who are about to lose their homes, churches hand-out the number for the city housing authority. Or instead of dealing with people who are going through a time of crisis we refer them to the county mental health department. “It’s best to send the people away.”

The New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen says, that our obligation to follow Jesus' example does not stop with the literal breaking of bread and feeding of the multitudes. He writes: "Because the disciples have become joined to Jesus by partaking of his life, they too – like Jesus – are bound to offer themselves as bread that is to be broken and partaken of by others." (Herman C. Waetjen, *The Origin and Destiny of Humanness*, p. 162).

As Christians we are all about recognizing that there is plenty left over ... and then giving away our resources and our very selves. The disciples probably tried to stop Jesus from creating a culture of welfare among his followers. ... You know how it goes ... you feed 5,000, then what tomorrow? Just give the kid back his lunch, make your speech, and let's get out of here." "All we have here are five pieces of bread and two fish. Jesus, it's not enough. You have to send them away."

Jesus told the disciples to bring him the small lunch. After praying, Jesus handed that food to the disciples telling them to go out into that crowd of 10,000 or 12,000 people and feed them. It is recorded that every person who was there ate and was filled. To the astonishment of all, after everyone had eaten, there were twelve baskets full of leftovers. The disciples had every rational reason to suggest that feeding the crowd was impossible. Jesus models for us the necessary hospitality that is given from the abundance found in life. We are the recipients of that abundance. We are given directions to acknowledge the leftovers and give away our resources and our very selves. There were ***Plenty of Leftovers and Still More***.

Barbara Brown Taylor has a sermon entitled "The Problem with Miracles." (in *The Seeds of Heaven*) She looks at how this story could have happened and asks "... where was the miracle in this event?" Building upon assertion that in those days everybody had a little food and it was by the power of the spirit of God that each person was inspired to share. The baskets of five loaves and two fish started through the crowd, and everybody started putting in the little lunch they had stashed away, and everybody got some, and there was lots left over. This explanation suggests that when we want miracles we tend to abandon our responsibility for doing our small part.

We all have to start with an obedient response to life's issues and God will be there with us ... and there will be ***Plenty of Leftovers and Still More***.

Thirteen years ago when I was the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, an adult education experience was offered related to the public school needs. Today there continues to be a tutoring and enrichment program at the Edison School and it is making a difference in the lives of many young people. There continue to be over 100 church members sharing their time and talents on a weekly basis with children who have a bright future. It is a miracle of God at work adding meaning and love to the lives of many.

In our congregation at Faith Church we know the history of Just Coffee ... where churches can reach out to our neighbors to the south with prayers and support through the purchase of their products. It is a project that represents warmth, hospitality, fellowship, hard work and life's pleasures both fine and simple. And it is has gone from the idea of one man to now a nationwide effort through churches of a variety of denominations.

Buying Just Coffee ensures that more of the money we spend on coffee reaches the hardworking farmers who actually grow it. We all have to start with an obedient response to

life's issues and God will be there with us ... and there will be *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*.

The Gospel story presents the disciples with the question on their faces when considering the massive crowd: "Who, us? What? How? Impossible!"

We too, feel we have no resources, no solutions at hand, and no commitment to really follow-through? "Feed the people, with what" is the question? There is nothing here but five loaves and two fish ... and so many people with so many needs! No way! Jesus took the lunch, blessed it, broke it, and when they had all eaten enough, and twelve baskets were left over! ... And there will be *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*.

Walter Brueggemann wrote a wonderful essay in *The Christian Century*. (March 24-21, 1999, pp. 342-347) He wrote: "The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us. ... Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians." He went on, "... we must confess that the central problem in our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity."

That is where the "rubber meets the road" the going gets tough. Consumerism and the acquisition of things are easy targets. There is more of what Brueggemann calls the "liturgy of abundance and the myth of scarcity." Wow! What a way to describe our American lifestyle and yet, it is not about "stuff" alone. It is about who we are, ... whose we are, ... and why we are. To put the question in the gospel context is to say, that there is *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*.

In the life of Faith Presbyterian Church this means we do mission ... we share God's leftovers ... we practice that hospitality of our faith. Our Quilters make a variety of projects, and right now they are helping as we plan for the trip in October to Chinle and Ganado. Yes, for four days in October, you can join the group that will travel to the Navajo reservation, learn some of the history, begin to know people by their first name ... and practice the welcoming hospitality of our faith.

And upon our return we will be receiving the latest Habitat for Humanity family ... and celebrating our financial support of this most recent home. The list in the work of this church is long ... but it is all about knowing and acting upon what the gospel tells us about *Leftovers and Still More*.

There is enough hospitality to heal the world's estrangement. There is enough hope to restore the world's despair ... there is even leftovers. There is enough wisdom to redress the deepest challenges of the 21st century ... with plenty of leftovers. ... And there will be *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*.

There is more than enough compassion to mend broken hearts in our communities ... with *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*. There is enough grace for liberal and conservative Presbyterians to seek common ground and shared vision ... with *Plenty of Leftovers and Still More*.

Do we believe that at 6:28 p.m. as we turn off the television news and move on to the rest of the evening? Do we believe that as we make our contributions to this church and our strong support of mission projects both near and far?

Yes, there are *Plenty Leftovers and Still More* and we are invited and we can give away our resources and our very selves.

Scriptures: Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Matthew 14:13-21