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Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Setting the Table for Others

Matthew 14:13-21

THE INTRODUCTION by Ellie Garvey, Liturgist

This familiar story from the gospel of Matthew begins "When Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." Heard what? What news could have prompted this reaction? In the previous paragraphs in chapter 14, we learn that Herod has ordered the death of John the Baptist. John was beheaded in prison. This is the news Jesus hears right before the crowds show up. John was the son of Elizabeth, who was a cousin of his mother Mary, so that made John and Jesus cousins as well. They were close in age, and we can imagine that when they were children they may have played together, before their predestined ministries began. So Jesus steps away to grieve the loss of his cousin. Matthew then jumps right into what happened when the crowd followed Jesus to the shore. Jesus patiently sets aside his own sadness and spends the afternoon in the crowd curing the sick. The miracle that comes next, which I will read to you in a minute, has been studied and debated by theologians for centuries. How did 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread feed 5000 people? Was it more of a spiritual feeding? Does spiritual fullness satisfy physical hunger? Matthew gives us a "just that facts, ma'am" account of what happened; it's up to us, the faithful followers of Jesus, to grapple with the details.

THE READING

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' ¹⁶Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' ¹⁸And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them

to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

SERMON:

In our household when we were little, it was most always my mother who set the table for us and cooked, and she was good. Whether she was preparing a thanksgiving menu or one of her weekday concoctions on a meager budget, we liked to hear: "Supper's ready!" The Isaiah 55 reading that I used for our call to worship today makes me think of this: "Come, all of you who have no money; eat at no cost and delight yourselves in what is good!"

Then, when we four kids got a little older, our mother had *us* set the table: plate, napkin, glass, fork on the left. As soon as possible, she also taught us how to cook.

It strikes me that a similar transition is happening in our reading here in Matthew. The disciples have reached a level of experience with Jesus and the ministry at which he wants them to step up and take more responsibility. The news of John's execution may have driven home the need for the movement to multiply into the hands of his followers. Indeed, in verse 15, we hear the disciples growing up, thinking ahead, and organizing: "Jesus, we see it's getting late; soon the stores will close and the people need food, so dismiss them now and let them get their own." It sounds as if our McDonald's society would have suited them.

But like my mother, Jesus said, "*You* set the table. They don't need to go. *You* give them something to eat." And he meant more than only physical food. So it is that the church sets tables for others, from potlucks to church school classes, to food sharing through Open Table, to prayer groups, to Crop Walks, to Bread for the World advocacy, to Sunday worship and communion.

I know; it's so nice to come to a table that's been set for us, and you and I can count on this from the God we worship, because grace abounds, but, eventually, when the time is right, Jesus asks *us* to set the table *for others*.

That's daunting, isn't it! I get why the disciples protested, standing before this hungry throng, offering all kinds of reasons why they couldn't comply. Hearing "*you* give them something to eat" provokes in all of us a feeling of inadequacy. I recall a Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown, leaning on the brick wall with his buddy, Linus, muses: "Some day I'd like to ask God why there are so many hungry people in the world," and Linus replies, "Me too, but I'm afraid he'll ask *me* the same question!"

Since it seems so daunting to feed so many - the hungry in body or soul - you and I get pretty adept at staying away from situations that need our sharing; we avoid the big Ask, or hide from church, Jesus, and God. We may try to put the needs of others out of our minds, living vaguely depressed and guilty. But such a reaction is the *last thing* that Jesus wants! As it has been noticed, "Nothing can be said so clearly that it can't be misunderstood."

So this morning, let's clarify a couple of things about the request Jesus made of us his disciples.

First of all, “You give them something to eat,” is not a call for the disciples to starve or to bankrupt themselves in feeding others. In the versions of this story in Mark and John, the disciples are flabbergasted and respond, “Why, it would take six month’s wages or more – 200 denarii – to purchase the needed groceries!” Their fear is similar to that of the pig standing by the hen in front of a big sign: “Help Feed the Hungry.” The hen said, “We should donate some ham and eggs,” to which the pig shook his head: “For you, it’s a contribution. For me, it would be a total sacrifice!”

We set the table for others by offering what we have at hand, within our means, with an open heart. Jesus didn’t ask them to do the impossible, nor to do *everything*. “What do you have?” We don’t know from the story whether the miracle was in them offering just their own provisions, or in such a way that inspired others to open their picnic baskets and pass them around too, but five loaves of bread and two fish was more than enough.

Over the years in my own giving and food sharing, I have found that it works best for me to fulfill Jesus’ request by buying some extra canned goods on my *regular* shopping trips and then bringing this to church, as you do here for Open Table, instead of waiting until I am emotionally stirred by images of the starving on the TV, for instance, and am asked for a much larger donation.

The same logic is operating behind exploring our spiritual gifts here at TriCon. Jesus doesn’t ask us to give that which we *don’t* have or until we are depleted, but to gladly offer *who we are*, limits and all, to the needs around us that match, in such a way that the giving and receiving is a blessing both ways.

Stories out of the Holocaust and prison camps testify to the miracle of this kind of sharing. In one place, they were allowed to celebrate the Eucharist, but had no bread or wine. Undaunted, the prisoners went through the motions emptied-handed, serving each other mime-style. “We took of nothing, and had everything!”

Second clarification, Jesus does not go away and leave the disciples alone to fulfill his request. “Give *me* what you have,” he says. **So we set the table for others *with* him and by the mysterious power of the Divine.** At TriCon and WCU we are not alone and left to just our own power in the mission God has called us to; we feed others in *partnership* with Christ.

A missionary to Honduras tells of Catelina Viegas. Between their sewing and nutrition classes at the mission, she would light a fire and make lunch for all present. Once the pile of tortillas was stacked, she would address God and pray by name for a long list of people, and close, “Gracious God, there are many hungry people, many children who cannot eat this lunch with us. God, please give *them* food. Amen.” The missionary remarked that the tortillas were never as hot by the end of the prayer as they had been when first set on the table, but the table that Catelina *and God* set truly satisfied their hungry souls!