

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
Title: Curing and Feeding – Acts of Compassion
Text: Genesis 32:22-31
Matthew 14:13-21

I have fond memories of a woman named Dottie. Dottie was physically shorter than many women while her best friend was considerably taller than many women. Both were committed to following Jesus faithfully. During the time when I knew Dottie, God kept calling her to try things that were well out of her comfort zone. She faithfully stepped forward and did what she believed God was calling her to do. She grew a lot in her abilities and would often remark that God was stretching her so much that someday she would be as tall as her best friend.

When we listen faithfully to Scripture and are willing to be open to where God may be calling us; what God may be calling us to try, to be, to do, we are likely to find ourselves being stretched and growing in ways we had not anticipated.

I think that both of today's scripture readings show us examples of people who have been stretched. In the reading from Genesis, we have Jacob afraid of what will happen when he meets his brother Esau after so many years. Alone, at night, he finds himself wrestling with – an angel, with God, with his inner self? We don't really know for sure, but we know that Jacob describes this as having seen God face to face. At the end of the encounter, he is forever changed. He has a new name – Israel – which means "wrestled with God". He has a limp that will stay with him. Jacob has been changed by an encounter with God.

In today's Gospel reading, the stretching may not be quite as obvious, but I think that Jesus was stretched and I'm sure that the disciples

were as well. Jesus is not having a good day. He has received word of the brutal death of his cousin John; the one who had baptized him in the Jordan River. He wants to go off by himself – to process what he has learned, to sit with his emotions, to talk with God. But, as we all know, things don't always go the way we would like them to go.

The crowd, anticipating where Jesus is going, makes their way by land to his destination – a deserted place. They are waiting for him when he arrives. Jesus could have simply told his disciples to turn the boat around and stay out at sea awhile longer. He could have had them turn and head to another location; but he didn't. He saw the crowd and Matthew tells us that he had compassion on them and spent the rest of the day curing the sick and teaching them as well. Maybe this wasn't a stretch for Jesus; maybe he had already gotten to the point where compassion was his default emotion when he saw a crowd; but I can't help but think that it must have been somewhat of a stretch for him. He had wanted to be alone; and yet, he immediately responded to the crowd with compassion. His reaction was to transform his own feelings into love for those in need.

As the day went on, and evening arrived, the disciples thought about the needs of the people. They had been with Jesus enough to know how much Jesus cared about the people. They had seen it this very day, when Jesus put aside his own needs and cared more about the needs of the crowd. They probably realized that most of them would not leave on their own accord. They would become hungry, but would be afraid to miss something and would stay until Jesus told them to leave. The disciples thinking of the needs of the crowd suggest to Jesus that he send them away so that they can go into the villages and buy food to feed themselves.

It was really a pretty good idea. They were probably a little proud of themselves for thinking about this; for thinking ahead, and encouraging Jesus to have them leave before it became too dark and it would be dangerous to travel. If truth be told, they might also have been thinking about themselves – it had been a long day and they were probably tired – and getting hungry themselves. They knew that they didn't have the resources to feed this many people, nor did they have the money even if there had been markets nearby from which to purchase food.

The thing is, when we try to solve problems ourselves, when we offer our solutions to Jesus, he very often takes what we offer and changes it into something very different than what we imagined. Jesus likes when we show that we are thinking of the needs of others, but then, as he did with the disciples, he often takes those ideas and does something surprising with them.

When the disciples presented their idea to send the crowd away to get their own food, he said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat." Immediately, they are struck by the practicality of this – and the impossibility of the task. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." It appears that they have already had a conversation about what their resources were. In the other gospels, it appears as if they have almost canvassed the crowd to assess the resources available. In John's gospel, a young boy has come forward to offer what he had – five small loaves and two fish. Clearly, this is not enough to feed even the disciples, and definitely not a very large crowd.

Still, they were willing to offer what they had – in John's gospel, a young boy is willing to offer what he has. When we are willing to give Jesus what little we think we have, as small and inadequate as it may

seem, Jesus takes it and once the power of Jesus' compassion begins to act, the results can be far beyond what we can imagine. What Jesus can do with what we give him is mysterious and powerful and hard to describe.

Jesus told them to have the crowd sit down. He took the five small loaves and the two fish; he looked to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. Imagine what it must have been like to be in the crowd that day. Imagine what it must have been like to be one of the disciples distributing a very small amount of bread to a large crowd. Somehow, everyone had enough to eat and at the end of the meal, they gathered up twelve full baskets of food!

How is this possible? The simple answer is that it is clearly a miracle. I could stop here and we would have a story of a miraculous feeding of a large crowd – about five thousand men and in addition all of the women and children who were present as well.

It's a great story – and it can stand on its own. Did it really happen? I'm thinking yes, since you may remember that this is the only miracle story told by all four gospel writers. If you want to leave it there and celebrate that miracle that is fine; but if we do, then it runs the risk of being nothing more than a great story – the likes of which we have never seen since.

There are many attempts to explain this miracle – because, of course, we do like things to make sense, don't we? A colleague from the same area of the world, explained that it is highly unlikely that anyone would have traveled without making sure that they had food with them. He tells of being on a train with three strangers sitting face to face. When lunch time came, he really wanted to pull out his lunch to eat it, but in his culture, he could not even consider doing so without sharing with the others seated with him. He waited and waited, wondering what to do, and finally

decided that having only a little bit to eat was better than having nothing to eat, so he reached for his lunch pail. As he opened it, the other three people did the same. They had all brought food with them as any responsible person in their area would have done, but each had brought only enough for himself and yet, in their culture, it was unacceptable to eat without sharing with those who did not have food.

His explanation is that as the food was being distributed, the people in the crowd, probably reached into their pockets and pulled out the small loaves of bread that they had brought with them. Each had brought enough for him or herself and maybe a little bit more. As the food started to appear, people could share with others if anyone had truly not brought any food with them and everyone had enough and more. In the end, twelve baskets of food were collected.

I have a friend, who shared this possibility with the congregation she was serving and was quickly accused of not believing the Bible. Please be assured, that is not what I am saying. I believe that God can and does work miracles, but I also believe that sometimes the miracle may be in what happens to us as we willingly give to God what little we think we have and then are amazed at what God can do with it.

When I was in North Kingstown, we were told by a couple from the church about a twelve-year-old girl in Sierra Leone who desperately needed heart surgery but the surgery was simply not available in her country and her family most definitely did not have the money to pay for surgery even if it had been available. A twelve-year-old, in the congregation, went home and told her mother that it was not fair; that if Safiatu lived here she would have already had the surgery and would be out playing with her friends. She wanted to know what she could do. Her

mother started making phone calls and before we knew it, we had a miracle of multiplication happening right in our midst. An 8-year-old boy raised \$1700 in pledges by riding his bike. People started coming forward with ideas and with donations. Initially the prayer request presented to us was simply that a request to pray, but inspired by the actions of one child – others began to act; others offered what they had- their ideas, their money, their creativity, their willingness to make phone calls, write news releases, do whatever they were able to do. It was not long before Safiatu, a Muslim child, was traveling from Sierra Leone to Tel Aviv Israel, to have surgery performed by Jewish doctors paid for by Christians in the United States.

We know where every penny came from – but I believe it was nothing less than a miracle – God taking what little each person could offer and multiplying it to save a life. Not only was her physical life saved, but she wanted to know why these Christians were doing this. It was explained to her that this was a way of sharing Jesus’ love. A few years later, Safiatu came to live here in Rhode Island with the family of the girl who insisted that something must be done. I had the privilege of baptizing her when she explained to me, “Jesus choose me, now I choose Jesus.” It is, and was, a miracle every bit as much as Jesus feeding a large crowd beginning with only five loaves and two fish.

Did the loaves and fish multiply miraculously in Jesus’ hands? Did others step forward and offer the loaves and fish that they had hidden in their pockets? I don’t know – and quite frankly, I don’t think it is really important how the miracle happened. All I know is that a very hungry crowd of people were fed that day and had more than enough.

Let’s not forget that it was not only physical food that they received that day. People had also received healing. They had received teaching –

new ideas, inspiration, guidance about how to live their lives in ways that would make a difference. They were fed spiritually and physically. A miracle occurred and people were changed. This all took place, because Jesus, even in the midst of his grief, had compassion on a crowd of people – people he didn't know but people he loved because they were suffering or because they needed to hear about the good news; they needed to hear and receive what he had to offer.

This miracle happens all around us when we open our hearts, wallets, ears, eyes, and are willing to have God use what we are able to give. A collection of pencils, notebooks, backpacks and other school supplies make it possible for 240 children in Liberia to have the tools they need so that they can receive an education. Food donated to a food pantry helps provide sustenance and nutrition for those who cannot afford to buy the food that they need. Visitors in a hospital or nursing home provide companionship and caring for someone who may be feeling alone. Voices joining in a choir provide worship leadership and inspiring music beyond what each individual can do. Teachers working together teach our children about God. People in a kitchen cutting food, cooking and preparing meals feed others and help to raise money to send school supplies to Liberia, and to provide safe water in places where it is needed. A portion of the money we put in our offering plate each week combines with money from other churches through our mission shares to make it possible for us to do together the ministries and missions that none of us are able to do on our own. Miracles of multiplication.

Jesus took the idea of the disciples – send the crowd away so they can go get some food – and turned it into something they could not even begin to imagine – an opportunity to feed everyone who was present when

they knew they did not have the resources or the ability to do so on their own. Jesus takes the ideas that we have and does something startling with them. “Our small idea of how to care for people gets bounced back at us with what seems a huge and impossible proposal. You protest. I can’t do it! I haven’t got the time. I haven’t got the energy. I haven’t got the ability. All I have is ...

“That’s the next step, and again, typical of how God’s calling works. By hanging around Jesus, you’ve had an idea. It wasn’t quite in focus, but your main intention – in this case that the people should be fed – is on target. Jesus proposes achieving that aim by a different means. You say it’s impossible – but you’re prepared to give him the little you’ve got, if it’ll be any good.”ⁱ What precisely Jesus does with what we give him is so mysterious and powerful that it’s hard to describe in words.

Jesus takes what little we have – our ideas, loaves, fishes, money, sense of humor, time, energy, talents, love, artistic gifts, skill with words, quickness of eye or fingers – whatever we have to offer; holds it before God with prayer and blessing, breaks it and gives it back to us and to those who need whatever we have brought.ⁱⁱ

What we bring becomes both ours and not ours – it becomes something greater than we had in mind; something different yet something that is also our own. It is part of genuine Christian service at every level that whatever we have, when we bring it and offer it to God, it becomes multiplied and transformed so that amazing things happen.

ⁱ Wright, Tom. *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, p.186

ⁱⁱ Wright, p. 187