Proper 13 Sermon
August 6, 2023
Trinity Episcopal Church
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Note: These sermons are written to be delivered orally, so proper grammar and punctuation take a back seat.

Today we hear the well-known story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. This is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels, which tells us it is important and central to the followers of Jesus. We can look at this story at face value and see it as a miracle of Jesus multiplying some bread and fish and feeding a huge crowd. And we can also look more deeply at this story and see it as a story about a profound spiritual truth that the Gospel writers want us to understand.

The story begins with scarcity: thousands of people have gathered out in the wilderness wanting to be near Jesus. It's getting late and the disciples want to avert a potential crisis. People are going to get hungry and if they stay here much longer, there could be some issues. They need to go home before it gets dark. So, the disciples go to Jesus to point out this potential problem, in case he hadn't thought of it: "Jesus, it's getting late and these people are going to get hungry. You have to send them back to their villages so that they can get something to eat."

I love Jesus' response. He says, "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." I can just imagine the disciples standing there, like... huh?? "We only have 2 loaves of bread and 5 fish. There isn't enough." There isn't enough. I can imagine the look of confusion on the disciples' faces.

And what does Jesus do in response to their panic? Looking at the small amount of bread and fish, he says, "Bring them here to me." "Bring them here to me -- give me your not-enoughness -- hand it over." And so, they do. And then what Jesus does is very important: He looks up to the sky, acknowledging God, the provider of everything. And then he gives thanks. He gives thanks for this not-enough bread and fish.Then he breaks the bread and the fish and hands it back to his disciples and tells them to distribute it to the crowds. And mysteriously, there is enough for everyone.

But here is a wonderful detail we often miss: The food isn't multiplied when Jesus is blessing and breaking the bread. The miracle happens as the disciples are distributing it. They discover, as they go, that there is miraculously enough for everyone. This wasn't a big splashy event miracle - it was a quiet, behind-the-scenes miracle that only the disciples noticed, similar to Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding banquet. The enough-ness, the abundance, just kind of ... happens. When people thought there wasn't enough, and then there... was. And all who were there were filled, and there were even leftovers.

Maybe the crowds were fed that day and didn't go hungry. Or maybe it wasn't about food. Maybe it was that the disciples were liberated from their panic in the face of scarcity. Maybe they were freed from the fear that there wasn't enough. Maybe they were freed from the belief that they weren't enough to be followers of Jesus. I know I relate to this fear. I relate to this when -- in the face of the headlines on climate change or the war in Ukraine or the affordable housing crisis --

I feel I am not enough. My meager ideas and resources and time are not enough in the face of these huge needs. And when so many feel this way, it leads to a collective despair, or a collective numbness. This is likely how the disciples felt when the sun was getting low in the sky and it was going to fall on them to solve this huge problem.

But Jesus stops them mid-panic and says, "Bring them here to me." Do we trust Jesus with our sense of lack? Do we offer him our overwhelm or sense of helplessness? "Bring them here to me," he says. The disciples hand him the meager bread and fish, and he takes them in his hands, looks to the sky, acknowledging the giver of all good gifts. Then, he gives thanks for what is here. He breaks it, and he gives it back to his disciples and tells them to give it away.

But how do we *believe* this deeper truth this story is revealing? How does this move from an interesting Bible story and become a living reality in our lives? Let's go back to the very beginning of the story, to the first sentence: "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What Jesus had just heard, is that Herod has just killed his cousin John the Baptist. Herod had him be-headed. This must have filled Jesus with grief. And also fear, because he knew he, too, was in danger. And so, in response to these feelings, he retreats to a solitary place for some time alone - to pray. This is a pattern in scripture where Jesus retreats to solitary places before he returns to the immense need that awaits him at every turn. In this story, he prays alone first, and *then* he goes to the crowds.

Something is happening in these solo respites - I imagine God filling him back up -- amplifying his heart -- allowing him to overflow with God's abundant love -- maybe even transforming Jesus' own sense of not-enoughness. In this story, Matthew shows us the spiritual truth that we have enough and that we are enough, if we allow God to transform our feelings of scarcity and fear into more-than-enough-abundance. One of the ways Jesus does this is through time alone in prayer. Do not underestimate the power of solitude and stillness before God. It is one of the ways God amplifies our hearts, grows their capacity, heals our fear and sense of lack.

Another way God does this is through community, which we also see in the Gospel story.
My youngest daughter Gwyneth is twelve and she spent one week this summer at a church camp in the mountains of Santa Cruz. It was a sleepaway camp and when she came home, I asked her what some of the highlights were. She told me a story she had heard from one of the speakers. It is such a simple story, but I see why it touched her, and it is perfect for today's Gospel. So, I will pass it on from Gwyneth to you -- I call it the Parable of the Big Mac.

A man walked into Macdonald's with his young son. There was a crowd of people there that day, looking for food, hungry, homeless. As children often do, the young boy's heart went out to these people in need and he made eye contact with one of the men there. The man asked the boy if he could get his dad to buy him a big mac and some fries. The boy said, "Of course!" The father rolled his eyes and whispered that if he bought one Big Mac, he'd have to buy a whole bunch since there were so many people wanting food, staring at them. Begrudgingly, he bought the man a Big Mac and fries. When the father and son were on their way out, they saw the man they had bought food for outside. He was leaning against a wall, dividing his one Big Mac into six pieces and handing it out to the others. He was also dividing his fries and everyone had about five fries. They were smiling and eating hungrily. This did something to the father. He felt ashamed and

moved by this man's generosity. The father took his son's hand, turned around, and walked back to the counter and ordered twelve Big Macs and fries. And everyone had enough and was filled. And the father's heart was full. This community on the margins amplified the father's heart, when the one who had the least modeled the most generosity.

Such a simple example of what God can do in our hearts in the face of lack. I don't tell this story to suggest we need to buy lunch for everyone every time we enter a restaurant. I tell it as an example of how God's spirit moving in community can change us - how our sense of lack can be transformed in such mysterious ways.

Another way this can happen is through another kind of meal - the Eucharist. Today's Gospel story is ultimately a Eucharist story. You might have noticed the pattern: Jesus taking the bread, giving thanks, breaking it, and distributing it through the disciples. In the face of our sense of lack and not-enoughness and fear of what might happen, Jesus says, "Bring it here to me." He gives thanks for what is, blesses it and breaks it and gives it back to us, that we might in turn give it away to the hungry world.

Nora Gallagher is an author who used to attend Trinity and in one of her books she writes, "Faith is a catch-and-release sport. And standing at the altar receiving the bread and wine is the release part." In light of today's Gospel story, what might we be releasing? Our mindset that there isn't enough? That *we* aren't enough? Our fear? Our tendency to let our heads dominate our hearts? Yes - all of that. And I'm sure you have your own to add.

We are enough. What we need is here. It is here in our hearts where there is much more mystery afoot than we could ever imagine. It is here among us in the community. And it is here at the Eucharist -- where Jesus takes us, thanks God for us, blesses us, feeds us, and distributes us to a world hungry for the enough-ness we feel, for the abundance we proclaim with our words and with our lives.