And Plenty for the Pilgrimage Home

“He came ashore into crowds:
The crowds with little peace
The crowds with little joy
The crowds with little hope

with hurts unnumbered
to bring to his caring

In a place like desert
a place like emptiness
a place of the aching heart

And the hour became late
and the shadows lengthened
and hunger was deeply felt.

Where shall crowds go
in this hour like emptiness,
in this time of warring,
in the gathering shadows of despair?

Where shall we buy
the hope that strengthens,
the love that nourishes,
the peace we so desperately need?

See how our baskets feel
nearly empty,
how in our own hurting,
weariness, and hunger
we believe we have little to give.

But hear, in the words of
the One who is kindness,
whose compassion reaches
beyond the setting sun

the hope our hearts long for,
on which we can feed.
Hear the invitation
to share even our weakness
for it contains the promise

that there is no emptiness
where the Source of all life
does not flow;
that there is no place
where death’s shadows are falling
where the Redeemer of life does not go.

We can feed upon that promise,
promise of sufficiency,
promise of despair overcome –
feed upon grace that is fullness of joy.
We can share, eat, and be full.

And there is plenty for the pilgrimage home.”

[from the weblog of Andrew King, A Poetic Kind of Place, July 27, 2014]

Such a rich story this feeding of the 5,000. There is much we are invited to “hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest”. One nugget is the why question – Why does Jesus perform this miracle? Because where God is, where Jesus is, there is compassion. As the story opens, Jesus has just gotten word that King Herod has murdered his cousin John the Baptist. Jesus has been thrown into grief and sorrow at John’s death. Jesus leaves by boat to seek solitude in a deserted place. When he returns to shore, he is met by a throng of people. The action begins when Jesus sees the people and “has compassion for them”. In Greek, to have compassion means “to be moved in the gut”, to feel another’s need deep within. Jesus felt the people’s pain deeply, down into his gut, so we know God feels our anxiousness, our ache, our emptiness, our hunger, our need for hope and healing. This is who God is. This is who Jesus was and continues to be now, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And always God’s compassion takes the form of love in action. This is what God does – sees, understands what we feel, loves us, and works to bring healing and wholeness to all creation, everything which needs to be made whole.

Follow now, how love gets acted out in this story. It is later in the afternoon when the disciples come to Jesus, concerned. There are no restaurants, no “golden arches”, not even a Sheetz or Rutters convenience store to be found anywhere within walking distance. It is deserted out there. How is this crowd, surely growing hungrier by the minute going to find something to ease the hunger pangs of their growling bellies?
“Lord, you need to send this crowd on their way – NOW – before they faint from hunger on their trip home.”

“They need not go away. You give them something to eat.”

“Lord we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

And now Jesus invites the disciples, his band of faithful learners to help him by taking action. This is a live “ministry opportunity”. It’s a chance for them to grow in their understanding of what God is like and what God desires. A chance to learn to trust God more deeply. In that moment, Jesus challenges them to turn away from the instinct to be self-concerned, self-absorbed. Turn away from ignoring and not wanting to get involved with the needs of others around them. Jesus invites them to join him in reaching out in active love.

Jesus sees possibility. The disciples? They are focused on impossibility, as they recognize the huge need and their meager resources. They are tuned in to the scarcity before them. In fact, at first they tell Jesus they have nothing – nothing – but five loaves and two fish. Jesus responds: “Bring them here to me.”

We don’t know if the disciples ever considered bringing the meager food they did have to offer to Jesus, before he asked them to bring forward the loaves and fish. In typical human fashion, and almost instinctively, their attention fixes on the immensity of the need, and their inadequacy to meet the need.

The beautiful thing is that Jesus uses the offering the disciples do bring – five loaves and two fish. This is a teachable moment. It is important for them to step out in faith and offer what they have, no matter how valuable or puny they think it is. This is why Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” After Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives them the bread and fish, the disciples share in the labor of distributing fish and bread to the hungry crowd.

We all have something to offer God to be used for God’s purposes. We begin by acknowledging that our life is not our own just to do with as we please. Everything we have and become belongs to God. Our time, money, possessions, energy, natural abilities, acquired skills, and even our relationships are on loan to us. Our response, our stewardship, our care of these gifts is not simply a matter of managing limited resources. Stewardship is a matter of giving what we have in faith, hope, and love in acts of worship and service that say “thank you” to God. Acts which praise God for all we’ve been given, for little can become much, little can become “more than enough” when given to God in trust, with thanksgiving.
Did you notice the multiplication and distribution of food results in not simply “enough” to eat, like one of those “lunchables”, or a boxed airplane meal? No! There is more than enough for everyone to eat and be satisfied. There is an abundance of food – far more than enough. God is like that you know – over the top in generosity, surprising us with good gifts that we could never imagine receiving.

I’ve been curious about those twelve baskets full of leftovers. That’s a lot of leftovers. What did they do with all that fish and bread? Divide it up and put it in doggie bags to go home with the people? Did the people take it with them to synagogue, and leave it as an offering for the poor? Maybe they held a free community dinner, where they encountered neighbors whom they had never before met. Timid, humble, hurting, and lonely, men, women, children, living with food insecurity, hungry for connection and belonging.

We all have come here with some yearning, some hunger in our hearts. How do you hunger for the compassionate touch of the Lord in your life? Maybe it’s a word of guidance or assurance you need. Healing for yourself or someone else. Maybe you need the Spirit to fill you with the courage to trust God more fully. Perhaps you hunger for deeper intimacy with God in your prayer life. Is there yearning for the willingness to respond more graciously and generously to God’s love for you?

Bring to God your emptiness and allow God to fill you with all that you need. The abundant, never failing love of God is here. The deep peace of God is here. God has been with us in the past. God will walk beside us into a future unknown to us. God has been and will continue to be faithful and compassionate. Let us find our rest in the great Giver of all things good. Amen.