

“YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT”

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Mark 6:30-44

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First Presbyterian Church

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Service for the Lord's Day

There is a congregation of Presbyterians far away from here, in the northwest corner of Montana, a congregation that in some ways is probably not that different than we are. I learned about this congregation this past week while I was on Continuing Education at the NEXT Conference, which is a gathering of Presbyterian leaders who seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in ways that are innovative and which make an impact in this changing world. But back to the congregation in Montana. I wanted to tell you this story, and I tried to write it myself, but I could never find words as compelling as those I heard earlier this week. So, let me borrow the words of their associate pastor, and simply read what she wrote, to tell the story...

Like many churches, after worship we have a coffee hour for fellowship. It's a little elaborate. The ones who host give a lot. A great woman named Joan hosted this particular fellowship hour: brought napkins to match the linens and homemade food. Within minutes 4 different people came to inform her, "We've never done it this way before." What were they up in alarm about? The plates...They were on the "wrong side" of the table. In a rush to save Joan from herself, these noble martyrs swooped in and returned the plates to their rightful place before catastrophe fell on the First Presbyterian Church. Joan—in her early 70s—is a dynamo, a visionary...generosity is in her bones and right then she felt an urge to commit physical harm. "I don't know if there is any hope for this church," she confessed.

This is the unlikely tale of First Presbyterian Church Kalispell and Serious JuJu Skateboard Ministry, of an untrained youth ministry vigilante, of a modern day Paul who once prosecuted skaters in the court before they turned his life upside down, and of a new community of skaters filled with love, generosity, and life that just won't die.

JD is not the guy who would darken the doors of a Presbyterian Church, let alone transform one, but he has. Eight years ago, he started small: going out to area skate parks with a cooler of water and a love for these kids no one else seemed to want. JD and his wife Nicky began to invite skaters on Friday nights to skate in their 420 square foot garage. Soon, close to 20 came each Friday night. Many of these kids would show up right after school and stay until after midnight. No one was calling to see where their kids were. No one was checking to see if they had eaten. So JD and Nicky began to serve the kids dinner and share The Word. JD confessed, "My wife and I sold anything we had of value to fund the ministry. Eventually we sold our home as well." Over the next few years, a dozen kids stayed with the couple to escape substance, physical and emotional abuse. Meanwhile, hundreds of skaters professed a growing faith in Christ.

Tom—a lawyer—has been a member of First Presbyterian Church since the mid-1980s. In Rotary, Tom first heard about JuJu and took them some meals. He then asked his church to

take a few meals to JuJu as well. After a while JuJu couldn't pay the rent, so the church helped. Later JuJu still couldn't pay their rent and shuttered their doors. On that very day, the very day they were closing their doors, the skateboard ministry received a grant as the newest PC(USA) 1001 worshipping community. JuJu resurrected. Paying off their debt and leaving their building behind they became mobile, taking to the streets. With portable ramps, they set up all over town. Each first Friday of the month, Tom made sure they were hosted at First Pres. JD and Nicky would eventually move out of state and once again, the ministry was threatened. Who could fill their void? It was Tom and his First Presbyterian Church.

Today, JuJu meets in an urban warehouse. They arrive on skateboards from the surrounding mixed and low-income neighborhood, get rides from a nearby small town, and skate all the way from another town 13 miles away. These kids come rain, shine, or freezing cold—which in Montana is most of the time. Working single moms drop off their kids and express gratitude for a place they know their kids will be safe. Two brothers called home at 9:00pm to get picked up. Their parents said, "No, we are not coming to get you. Find your own way home." Often, we don't know where the kids are going but they aren't going home. Tom drove Evan home to pick up things he needed for the weekend. His parents were getting high and Evan needed to get home and grab a few things before crashing on a friend's couch. When Tom pulled up at Evan's home, he saw two singlewide trailers pushed together with a tarp between. Evan shared that it can be difficult to sleep in his room with the open wall especially when it stays below freezing. On a recent summer night, another skater thanked our volunteers for the meal and shared this would be his only meal of the weekend. Ever since, our church donates and sends home at the end of the skate night over 30 bags of food.

Tom is smart but God was the one with the big design. You see, we waded in slowly—an unthreatening meal, the use of a parking lot. Any faster and we would have passed up witnessing this miracle. Tom—the lawyer—has been Presbyterian all his life but he's never been more proud. Today he is also passionate. Unsuspecting First Presbyterian Church has become passionate for these kids too. Someone quilted blankets for those who couch surf. 70- and 80-year-old PW widows now cheer on skaters. Meals are coordinated by a grandmother who has witnessed the transformation of her grandkids now having a safe place to be at night. The landlord is a couple who grew up in a cult, escaped and wrote off God as abuser. JuJu is the only church they'll enter. Our lawyer and leader Tom confessed, "JuJu has changed my life. You see, I was the Apostle Paul. I used to prosecute kids like these all the time. Now, they've changed my life."¹

It's a good story, isn't it? But what, you may be asking yourself, does it have to do with the Feeding of the 5000?

¹ Story heard at NEXT Conference, February 23, 2016. Available in written form at <http://miriammauritzen.wix.com/ministry#!serious-juju/c24f1> or in video format at <http://nextchurch.net/national-gathering-live-stream/> and clicking on Ignite: Miriam Mauritzen. In this text it has been edited for the sake of brevity and clarity.

As that story is recorded in Mark, Jesus and the disciples are heading off for a little rest. They'd been busy, and Jesus knew the disciples could use a break. But Jesus also knew that he wasn't going to be able to ignore the crowd that had followed them, because they needed something, too. They wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. And Jesus had compassion for them—in this sense, he gave them what they were hungry for, what they were spiritually hungry for.

As Jesus was teaching, though, the disciples recognized another problem. You know, it's not so hard to *identify* the problems. They recognized that it was late, and that folks were probably getting hungry, and that there was no place around to get food. So, the solution to the problem? Send the people away. Don't deal directly with the problem, get rid of the problem. Let the people handle it themselves. That was the disciples' response.

Jesus' response was just the opposite. Instead of sending the people away, he made the problem the disciples' problem. So—you see that they're hungry? “You give them something to eat.”

Well, great. How exactly does he expect us to do that? It must have come off as a sort of challenge. And the truth is, their response was a little bit defiant. “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” Now it's hard to know exactly what two hundred denarii would be equivalent to—but we're talking in the realm of thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of dollars—not the kind of money that the disciples would have at hand. So that's not really a reasonable suggestion. Perhaps that's why Jesus doesn't acknowledge it—anyone could tell it was facetious. Instead Jesus asks them what they do have. And you remember what happens. The disciples report that they have five loaves and two fish. And so Jesus takes it. He takes that small amount of food, blesses it, and though we don't know how, he manages to feed the multitudes with twelve baskets full of leftover bread and fish. What seems like scarcity becomes abundance in the hands of Jesus.

And it is interesting to note that there is no indication that the crowd was even aware that a miracle had occurred. It seems as if it was the disciples for whom this miracle was a sign, pointing to the reality of the Kingdom of God. It was the disciples who were the intended audience, who were supposed to be transformed by this event.

As we have studied the life of Jesus over the past few weeks, we have looked at a number of different events. This particular event stands out in that it appears in all four Gospel accounts. It is the only event in the life of Jesus, except for the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection, that appears in all four Gospels. And in two of the Gospels, we see either a very similar event or a repeat of this story with the Feeding of the 4,000 in both Mark and Matthew. So it seems to me that it is clear that there is something about this story that we are supposed to get. And I'm betting that it is not just the message that Jesus can feed a bunch of people a substantial lunch in a pinch.

See, we already know that our God is a God who creates things out of nothing. So the truth is that there was no need for Jesus to take the disciples' little lunch from them to feed the rest of gathered crowd. The story of the Feeding of the 5000 is not just a story about how Jesus

and the disciples made sure a bunch of people got fed one day. It is really a story about transforming the vision of the disciples, about inviting them into the work of God, about showing them what it would be like to participate in the Kingdom of God. That was what the miracle pointed to—it was a sign of the reign of God. And God had determined to involve the disciples, and to involve you and me in this, in the bringing about the Kingdom.

And so, just like the disciples, we are asked what we have. What is it that we have that we can offer? What resources, which sometimes are financial resources, but maybe even more importantly are talents, or time, or a vision for something new, or just plain willingness? What do we have that we can give? And then God takes that, and that's when we get to watch and see what God can do—which might just be something miraculous.

This is part of what our Missions Committee's Year in Mission project is designed to help us do—to start to see the ways that we can be involved in our community, instead of just writing a check and passing on the job of mission to some agency or a committee in the church. To open us up to God's activity in the world. And at the same time, opening ourselves up to the ways that we might be transformed. Because that's what we risk missing out on if we don't offer Jesus what we have. The miracle of our own transformation.

And you see, that is what has happened in this church in the northwest corner of Montana that is not that different from us. Because the church there has been transformed. Sure, the kids who skate are benefiting. Their lives are being transformed day by day as they grow in their faith. They are receiving food and sometimes shelter and a place to skate and they are learning the Bible, but honestly, they may not even be aware of the extent of the miracle that is taking place around them. The transformation that has happened is that a church that once had no hope, that was once dying of thirst in the desert of minutiae, lost in the wilderness of which side of the table the plates ought to be placed upon, is now actually getting to witness the power of God at work in the world. They are actually participating in the miracle of God's saving love for all of humanity. They see the sign of the coming Kingdom in the kids who gather together as a new community of believers.

I don't know exactly how it happened there. That's the thing about a miracle. We don't know exactly how it happens. But what I do know is that someone who knew nothing about the world of skaters was willing to give what he had, and others who had eyes to see the sign before them, were willing to give what they had. And more were open and willing to do the same and to join in the work of God's Kingdom.

And Jesus took that which they had to offer, and multiplied it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.