

Covenant Word

Enough of Everything

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Matthew 14:13-21

arrangement made was that he would bring some friends, and they would pack and hand out snack packs. But when he got to the church, he told us that because the weather had turned cold, his mom had sent a crockpot of chili. Cody asked if he could invite people into the church to serve it. We were caught a little off guard by his generosity and kindness, and, I'm embarrassed to say, that we only reluctantly agreed.

We made a pot of coffee. We invited those who came into the church for coffee, chili, and snack packs but most of all for a warm and generous welcome. It is no exaggeration to say that everything at Highlands changed that day. A barrier was broken, relationships began to be built, and our hospitality hour has grown and flourished.

Matthew tells a similar story. While the generous hearted child of John's gospel is not present in Matthew, we read him/her into the background story of this text. Like Cody, innocent generosity and naïve hospitality go a long way in changing the hearts of thousands.

The story actually begins with bad news. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and mentor in the faith, had been imprisoned by Herod and then beheaded at the whim of Herod's dancing daughter. This news has just reached Jesus, and he is shaken by it. Jesus has lost his

Like Cody, innocent generosity and naïve hospitality go a long way in changing the hearts of thousands.

It is only recently that the merchants and ministers of Five Points have begun to meet together monthly. It is helping us realize that there are ways to bring our community together with ministry efforts in cooperation with the challenges of commerce. At one meeting, the merchants asked how it is that the churches started feeding the hungry and the homeless. Highlands United Methodist Church seems to be the target of these conversations, because they open their doors every morning to feed the hungry, hand out mail, and assist those who need to apply for identification cards. So Reggie Holder stood. Reggie has been on the staff of Highlands United Methodist since 1989. He is the Director of Growing Ministries. This is the story he told:

I've always been amazed at the number of people who are hungry, hurting or in trouble and how they just show up at the door of the church. It is almost as if they understand what we are to be about more than we understand ourselves. In the beginning when the hungry showed up at Highlands, we gave out vouchers for a meat and three at the Piggly Wiggly which was located on 20th Street. The Piggly Wiggly closed, but that did not keep people from coming to knock on our door. We had to do something, so we came up with snack packs. The snack packs were plastic grocery bags. Each one contained a can of Vienna sausages, a nutty buddy bar, a small can of fruit cocktail and some peanut butter crackers. Then, when people came to the door of the church hungry, we literally cracked the door of the church and handed a snack pack out to them.

We did this for a couple of years until one day a Cub Scout from the church, named Cody, called and asked if he could help serve snack packs. He was working on a badge. The

prophet, the very one who gave his life over to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. John's execution is a vivid reminder to Jesus, and those following him, that God's prophets are not immune to the cruelty of those who don't understand, and so they are often targeted for violent deaths. It seems these deaths always happen sooner rather than later, and we are never prepared for their occurrence. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Problem with Miracles," *The Seeds of Heaven*)

And so upon hearing of John's death, Jesus is looking for a "lonely place," a quiet place where he can sort his thoughts without interruption. But instead, what Jesus finds is that the crowds, the multitudes, hordes and hordes of people, Matthew says 5,000 men with women and children in addition, come out to follow him, and to hear him teach. When Jesus sees all of

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
August 6, 2017*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for
wanting to read and
study these thoughts
more carefully.
Please know that I do
not take full credit for
anything that may be
contained within,
because I may have
read or heard
something at some
point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source
and thus, cannot give
the rightful author
his/her credit. I pray
that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant
Where Faith Comes to Life

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

them, he is moved. It is a visceral response, one that he feels down deep in his bowels. These people – ALL these people with their overwhelming lostness and struggles, experiencing their own grief and personal disappointments – these multitudes of people are like sheep without anyone to give them guidance. So Jesus delays his own retreat to stay with them. For most of the day, Jesus walks among them laying his hands on them to heal the sick and mend the broken hearted.

As the day progresses, the disciples realize that their presence in a “lonely place” prevents the availability for provisions. If the disciples are hungry, surely the crowd is hungry, but there is no Publix or drive-through nearby to get the supplies needed to feed so many. “Send them home,” the disciples suggest to Jesus. Send them home so that we can get on with taking care of ourselves. Send them home so they can be responsible for themselves. Send them home to get something to eat.

Jesus, however, has a better idea. “They don’t need to go away, you give them something to eat.” Jesus’ sense of the crowd is more than what the disciples are taking in. They look at the crowd, and their own meager resources, and make assumptions like we do. They assume scarcity. But when Jesus looks at the crowd, he assumes plenty: plenty of time, plenty of compassion to share, plenty of resources on hand, plenty of God to go around. (Taylor)

So Jesus asks the disciples to bring the food they have to him. The crowd is seated. Jesus takes the bread. Jesus blesses the bread. Jesus breaks the bread. Jesus shares the bread. Now the people watching must have been moved by the simple trust the disciples possess in order to place their humble resources in Jesus’ hands. They must have been moved by the simple confidence Jesus possesses in that the food offered would be enough to feed all of those gathered. Because those people watching, it seems, begin to trust and share too: a few raisins, some cheese folded in a grape leaf, a bit of bread tucked into a sleeve or a pocket or somewhere in the folds of their tunics...just waiting for the right moment to go off by themselves for a quick bite.

That could have worked except the disciples start passing around baskets, and rather than keeping all of the bread for themselves, the gathered begin to put what they have into the baskets. They act as if they are taking bread out when in reality they are putting bread in...rye, pumpnickel, sour dough, wheat, white, pita. Any kind of bread you want to imagine, so that the meal grew and grew until five thousand were fed and 12 baskets were left over.

“Oh, but preacher,” you may be thinking. “What you are suggesting is not a miracle! That is just human beings being generous. They are just sharing what they have. That is not a miracle! That is just a whole crowd of people moving from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty. That

is just people overcoming their fear that they will go hungry. That is just people giving up their need to protect themselves. That is just people refusing to play the age old game of what-is-mine-is-mine-and-what-is-yours-is-

yours. That is just people turning their pockets inside out for another without worrying about what is in it for them. That is not a miracle!” OR IS IT? (Taylor)

The problem with miracles is that they are dazzling. They mesmerize us with the greatness of God, so that we forget about our own responsibility. Miracles let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd; let God save the world; let God do it all. “We do not have what it takes,” we tell ourselves. What we have to offer is not enough to make any difference at all, so we hold back and wait for a miracle, looking after our own needs and expecting God to help those who cannot help themselves. (Taylor)

That is when the words of Jesus resound in our ears: “You give them something to eat. Not me, but you; not my bread, but yours; not sometime or somewhere else, but right here right now. Stop looking for someone else to solve the problem and you work to bring about solutions. Stop waiting for manna from heaven and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.” (Taylor)

Now, we don’t really know how this feeding happened. Your guess is as good as mine, but the words that Jesus shares with his followers are words that come to us even today. “You give them something to eat,” he says, because when there is enough of God, there is enough of everything.

Like Highlands United Methodist Church, people knock on the doors of this church. Some are looking for assistance to pay Alabama Gas or the Birmingham Water Works or Alabama Power. Some are in need of transportation, and some are just hungry. And so on Wednesday nights, when we gather for fellowship supper, guests just started coming. I don’t remember the particular Wednesday night. I don’t know who it was who was gracious enough to say “come on in.” I don’t know who paid for that first plate of food. And to be honest, it doesn’t really matter. Because what we have done, and I pray will continue to do even in

But when Jesus looks at the crowd, he assumes plenty: plenty of time, plenty of compassion to share, plenty of resources on hand, plenty of God to go around.

“You give them something to eat,” he says, because when there is enough of God, there is enough of everything.

our updated fellowship hall with fresh paint and new floors, is to be people whose faith moves us to be active participants in the continuing miracle of feeding the multitudes. Feeding that continues even today because we dare to answer Jesus' command: "You give them something to eat." I believe he multiplies generous hospitality simply because when there is enough of God, there is enough of everything. Let us invite him to continue the miracle as we gather about his table today.