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Booker T. Washington was fond of telling this story:

A ship, lost at sea in the Atlantic Ocean along the northern coast of South America for many days, suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel came the signals: "Water, water. We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel came back at once: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time, the signal: "Water, send us water!" from the distressed vessel. And was answered again: "Cast down your bucket where you are."

A third and fourth signal for water was again answered: "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket. It came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River, which extends miles out into the ocean in what is called the "River Sea."

In this story a ship full of people had an urgent need for fresh water, and it was closer at hand than they knew. I thought of that story this week as I looked at the scripture. Like the story of the thirsty mariners, this Bible story overflows with many needs.

First, a need for rest:

The apostles need rest (Mk. 6:31).

If you look at the verses just before the ones we heard this morning, the disciples had just returned from their first mission trip. Jesus had sent them out 2 x 2...He said they were to take nothing but their sandals and staff and one tunic. They were to rely solely on the hospitality of the people. So they went and proclaimed God's good news. Now they have returned and they are tired. They are worn out by the demands of their lives and the needs of others. They are tired and need some rest. They apparently had some food to share, but not even time to eat it because of the crowds teeming around Jesus (v. 31).

On top of that, Jesus recently had learned of the death of his cousin John. Grieving people need rest and refreshment too.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book: *An Altar in the World* offers insights on just how busy we are, the lost art of hearing Jesus' invitation to us, and giving ourselves permission to rest to claim the Sabbath time God gives us.

She even has the audacity to accuse me-- in all the busyness of my life-- of trying to earn my own salvation.

In one part, she notes that in China the polite answer to the question of "How are you?" is to say, "I am very busy, thank you."

That is the measure of our success-- an indication of how we run in this world-- and measure of lives, no matter where we live.

And then I think about Jesus' invitation again...

We too could use that cool grass between our toes, the blue sky overhead, the rest underneath a tree, the Jesus who listens to us. And the gift is that we too are on the guest list, and Jesus extends the same invitation to us, in our weary, tired lives, with demands just around the corner. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Yet, despite Jesus' needs and the apostles' fatigue, the crowds needed a teacher. Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on the people because they were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 6:34). I've always found that verse very moving as Jesus, despite his grief and fatigue, is moved to meet the needs of the crowds around him by the deep compassion he feels for them.

The Greek word for COMPASSION refers to the inwards parts, especially the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. In the ancient world these organs were the considered the seat of affections. In other words the whole inner being is stirred...or maybe disturbed. In Jesus this stirring leads to the action of teaching the 5000.

As the teaching concludes, another need becomes apparent...

A need for food:

The disciples notice that it's getting late and the people are hungry. They come to Jesus to get him to give the benediction and get the crowd on its way (and out of their way). "Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat" (v. 36).

My sense is that this crowd does not have that kind of money, but the disciples don't seem to care about that as long as they leave.

Essentially, the disciples say, "Send them away. They are not our responsibility."

Clearly they are not feeling the same compassion as Jesus.

Jesus sees needs that God can meet.

The disciples don't see this.

Instead, the disciples see an obligation that they cannot meet. They cannot imagine how they will ever be able to feed all these hungry people. ...And they do not want to make promises that they know they cannot keep.

This scene contrasts with the many church potlucks that we've attended over the years.

Wherever we have served churches, there are tables groaning under the weight of the specialties of the ladies (& men) of the congregation, from macaroni and cheese to marshmallow fruit salad, from BBQ pork to meatball casseroles. And the desserts....of the desserts are divine...cookies, cake, brownies, bars and more...YUM!

We invite everyone to come into Fellowship Hall and after a brief prayer we go through and select from all these good things.

But church potlucks are different from this story in Mark 6.

First, nobody brought much of anything.

That's why Jesus' orders to his disciples "You give them something to eat" (v. 37).

The disciples move through the crowd to see what is available. They come back with a disappointing report. "Not much is here," they say, "Five loaves and two fish."

This doesn't seem to bother Jesus at all.

He tells the disciples to have people sit in groups of 50 or 100. By the way...the numbers tell a fascinating story here. It's worth unpacking this at another time.

Then Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven and give thanks to God, breaks the bread, and gives it to the disciples and the others gathered.

I hope this sounds familiar. This past Sunday as we celebrated communion I said:

On the night in which he gave himself up for us,
He took the bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread,
gave it to his disciples, and said:
"take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

This meal (& others in the Bible) informs our communion liturgy as we take...bless...break and give.

I think one of the messages of this passage may be that we may have a few crusts of bread in our pockets we hadn't remembered were there.

In other words, there may be more resources in a given situation than we realize.

Joni Mitchell sang that insight in her classic, 1970 song "Big Yellow Taxi."

*Don't it always seem to go,
that you don't know what you've got till it's gone.
You pave paradise and put up a parking lot.*

She's right. Sometimes we underestimate what we have and what others have only to realize them after the fact. We dismiss our current circumstances, thinking the grass will always be greener in another place, job, relationship, or church.

Yes, perhaps we underestimate our gifts and ourselves.

But what if, within the confines of our situations, within the gifts and abilities of people around us, within our own life stories and buried family heritage, there were untold riches, untapped resources of wisdom, energy, and inspiration? Then, the message of this passage would be "Cast down your buckets where you are" and find the resources you didn't realize were there.

That's a helpful message, and true in some cases.

But I think the more the more important message of this passage focuses on God.

I think the important message is that God can do a great deal with a little bit.

This story tells of Jesus as source of rest, leadership, and nourishment.

Church potlucks bless food that is present and waiting on the table.

Jesus' supper blesses food that is not present and yet still satisfies the hunger of an overflow crowd.

I do not feel the need to demystify or explain the miracle stories of Jesus.

I have friends who say this story is about everyone reaching deep into their pockets and finding a little bit there and then sharing it...and when they did so – all of them together – they find enough...more than enough.

Maybe the disciples couldn't talk to everyone...there were more than 5000-people there!

Maybe everyone held onto the little bit of food that they had at first, because they wanted to be sure that they had bread for their journey home.

Of course, this is possible...but I have no desire to demote this miracle to a "See what happens when we all share" motif.

Yes, I do believe that it is important that we do share...and, yes, sometimes we have more to share than we may know (or be willing to share!). This IS all true.

I think the message of this story is more of a "See what happens with a little when the power of God is behind it."

Over the years, I have learned – sometimes firsthand – how little one person can accomplish in the big scheme of things. I find that to be liberating...no longer is it all up to me and us.

That doesn't mean I/we do nothing.

I have also realized how important that little bit that I/we can do. I am called...you are called...we are called to do that little bit that we can do. This is motivating knowledge.

You/me/we do what little we can and trust that God will do what God can do. That is the work of God.

Jesus, on the hillside, does not bless several tables groaning under the weight of the bounty we have prepared and brought (like the potluck that we will have later today).
Instead, Jesus blesses five loaves and two fish.
Jesus' version of a potluck – this "Lord's Supper" – is a demonstration of grace.

God does in and through us things we cannot do on our own.
God moving mountains with faith the size of a grain of mustard seed.

"Cast down your bucket where you are" may help us discover resources we didn't realize we had. "Cast down your bucket where you are" is sure to help us discover the presence and power of God at the depths of our experience.

This is the Lord's Supper, not just another church supper.
Cast down your bucket where you are...discover what God can do for us all.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.