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 5th Sunday of Lent

Mosaic: God Uses our Resources
Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a **deserted place** by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have **nothing** here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were **filled**; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, **twelve baskets full**. ²¹ And those who ate were about **five thousand men, besides women and children**.

This story happens after the death of Herod.
 In response, Jesus withdraws to a **DESERTED place** by himself,
 grieving the loss of his friend.

The word for **deserted place** is the Greek word *eremos*.
 Which means a **solitary, desert, or wilderness** place.
 In Hebrew thought,
 the **wilderness is a place of wandering, testing, and temptation**.
 It's a **liminal space**--- of transition.
 But also, a space of learning and transformation.

The Israelites escape Egypt, cross the Red Sea,
 and spend 40 years wandering in the **wilderness** with Moses,
 before entering the Promised Land.
 Jesus is tempted by Satan for 40 days in the **wilderness**.

The wilderness or desert place
 is also a place *where God does amazing things!*
 Like giving manna, the bread from heaven.
 Or feeding Jesus after his fasting and temptation.

And there's *another reason why the deserted place is important--*
 What if it's where *we are TODAY?*
 Aren't WE in a kind of deserted place,
 in a season of uncertainty, crazy politics, all kinds of changes?
 Aren't we in a place that is filled with uncertainty, fear, and anxiety?

And we, like that crowd of 5000, are wondering what Jesus will do for us.
 We too are *hungry for God*, aren't we?
 So, we need the *transformation* that can come from this place, right?

Shane Stanford, in his Lenten book *Mosaic: God Uses All the Pieces*,
 talks in this fifth week of Lent about how
God Uses Our Resources to make a mosaic.
 God takes even our *most meager* resources,
 And uses it to make a masterpiece.
 God transforms our resources into something beyond our imagination!

This story is about that kind of transformation.
 In this story, *Jesus* is moved by compassion for the crowds.
 Even in his grief, he sees their needs.
 He starts by curing the sick, and then moves to feed the hungry crowd.

But WE are like the *disciples*.
 The disciples see the hungry crowds,
 and *want them SENT AWAY* to buy their own food at the end of a long day.
 The disciples see *hungry people*,
 Jesus sees *people hungry for food, and so much more*.

The disciples see **SCARCITY**.
 They say to Jesus: "*We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.*"
 Did you hear that?
 They say: We have **NOTHING!**
 This five loaves and 2 fish can't feed this huge crowd.

When have ***YOU felt*** that way?
 That you have nothing to offer?
 Nothing to give?
 That you cannot meet the needs of the people around you?
What do WE DO when we feel that way?

What do we do, when we feel we have NOTHING to give to God?
 Or that what we have is not enough?

The Disciples see the loaves and fish, and they see ***SCARCITY***.
 Like we do, right?
 How often do we focus on what we do ***NOT have***—
 instead of looking at what ***God HAS given to us?***

Jesus, on the other hand, sees ***ABUNDANCE***.
 Bring the food here to me, he says.
 Then he ***takes, blesses, breaks, and gives*** it back to the disciples,
 And they start feeding that crowd!

Where the disciples see ***ONLY 7 pieces*** of food,
 Jesus sees ***7 pieces of food***—
 7, the number of completeness, fullness, wholeness in the Bible!

And these 7 little pieces of food lead to everyone eating,
 and ***12 baskets*** of leftovers! 12.
 Like the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 disciples.
 Amazing, right?

This is a ***life-changing miracle story!***
 In fact, this ***miracle story*** is the ***ONLY*** one found in all 4 Gospels!

Stanford reminds that this is a miracle with ***TWO parts***.
 There is the ***actual feeding*** of over 5000 people!
 And then there is the ***miracle of God using our meager resources***,
 and transforming them into something amazing and beautiful!

In this miracle story, Stanford says there are ***some 'LESSONS' for us***.
The FIRST lesson is that WE are called to notice the NEEDS around us.
 Jesus noticed the needs of that crowd—
 How often do WE notice the needs of people around us?

Or do we simply walk by?

Are we so busy with our own lives that we fail to reach out? Or respond?

To call, or visit, help, or listen?

The SECOND lesson is that we are called FOCUS on what we HAVE, Not complain about what we don't have.

Stanford says that God makes our gifts sacred and usable.

He says: "Jesus makes our gifts holy by his presence"

How has God made YOUR gifts holy?

The THIRD lesson is that we should SHARE our resources, to build community.

This is not just giving a hand-out, this is about building community.

Stanford says that the feeding of the 5,000 is more like a fellowship dinner, not a soup kitchen.

In other words, the disciples start passing out food, and many believe that the people who received that food started sharing it, so the small resources multiplied ...and built community in that crowd.

Stanford says that ***God uses our resources FOR COMMUNITY.***

And he encourages us to ask ourselves:

Are we just ***writing checks*** to help people?

Or are we building community?

Are we just giving money, or are we ***giving OURSELVES***—our time, talent, and treasure?

Are we paying attention to what people REALLY NEED?

Like not giving money, if what is needed is a call, a visit, or a hug and smile?

The FOURTH lesson of this miracle story is that ALL our gifts matter.

Nothing should be wasted.

Stanford says that God can use everything in our lives and all of our resources, To meet the needs around us.

Stanford says God's "grace cannot be contained"

Shane Stanford, *Mosaic: When God Uses All the Pieces*, Abingdon: Nashville, 2011, pgs 54-55.

So, what about US?

Will we allow God to use all of our resources?

Will we seek to build community, and meet needs,

And be the hands and feet of Jesus on earth?

All of this requires *a different mindset, and perspective.*
 We usually live in the world of scarcity--
 Focused on what we do NOT have,
 What we CANNOT give,
 Problems we cannot SOLVE.

What if we turned that upside down?
 What if we lived in the world of God's abundance?
 And focused on what we do HAVE?
 On what we CAN GIVE?
 On problems we CAN solve?

We can't solve everything, but we *can do something.*
 We may not have everything, but we *do have SOMETHING to give!*

If we focus on everything that is wrong around us,
 And see only scarcity,
 Then everything around us looks *bad, small, it comes up short.*

But if we look through the lens of ABUNDANCE,
 Through God's eyes, and God's heart—
 That's when true transformation takes place!

I once heard one of our PCUSA Moderators, Jan Edmiston, ask at a Presbytery retreat----*what breaks God's heart in your neighborhood?*
 Isn't that a powerful question?
What breaks God's heart in Matawan?
 Is it breaking our hearts too?
 What are we going to do about it?
 What resources will we bring to God—to meet those needs?

In my last church, in Owasso, OK we saw a need for hot meals,
 so we opened a *pay as you can café* called OpenTable—
 to help *feed people* beyond food pantries.
 But it also was to *build community* around those tables.

The story of miraculous feeding is actually a *pattern in the Bible.*
 There are dozens of stories about feeding people.
 Jesus also feeds the 4000, Elijah feeds the widow and her son,
 Elisha miraculously feeds 100 people.

In fact, *the kingdom of God* is often referred to as a *great banquet*.
 And Jesus tells parables about it.
 Jesus talks about how we will be judged by *whether we fed the hungry*.

Again and again, God *feeds* people,
 And God's provision is **ABUNDANT**.
 But you know what God uses to feed people?
PEOPLE. LIKE US.
 We have to give our resources to God, to meet the needs around us!!!

We have to give---of our time, our talent,
And our treasure! Our money!
 This story is also a calling to be generous-Just like Jesus is generous with us!

What if, we are *called to share our gifts*---- Even when we feel it's not enough?
 Isn't that part of *discipleship*?
 Remember, it's *not Jesus* who feeds this crowd,
 It is the *disciples who pass out the food!*
 And collect all the leftovers!

Aren't *WE the disciples*?
 Aren't we called to bring our gifts,
 And trust in God's *abundance*?

It's not easy.
 We can't always see the big picture, the big mosaic.
 We see a *lunchbox*, and assume it cannot feed a *crowd*.
 We see our *bank statement*, and assume it cannot change countless lives.

But it can!
 Because *we are the body of Christ, we are His* hands and feet today!

So *how will we bring what we have to God*,
 and trust that it is more than enough?
 How will we abandon our fears, and the *MYTH of scarcity*,
 And trust in the *TRUTH—of God's abundance*?

How do you *view your time? your Talent? your treasure?*

Do you realize that God can use ALL of it, for miracles?

Do you realize that God wants to take what you have,

And multiply it, over and over?

So many of us give to other non-profits, I support a child through Compassion.

But where else do you get to SEE the beneficiaries of your gifts---

Growing and thriving----right before your very eyes?

Where else do you get to see the people receiving your gifts,

Be born, grow up, celebrate milestones, and even go onto the kingdom of heaven?

That only happens when we give in the body of Christ, the church!

When we give HERE—we have *the privilege, the joy, the luxury* of seeing exactly what our gifts can do—as we smile at the recipients beside us,

As we see babies born and baptized,

And kids learning in classrooms,

As we hear them stomping up the chancel so they can sing or play bells!

When we give in the body of Christ—we get to see our gifts at work.

We get to hear the music, learn from teachings, enjoy the fellowship,

We get to be a part of the outreach that tells our community

this is safe and loving place.

When we give HERE, we grow closer to God and to one another in a unique way.

Jesus asks us to believe in a *different kind of ‘math’*—

Divine math----which means that *giving plus giving,*

doesn’t take away from what you have.

It *multiplies* in the kingdom of God.

It’s *ALWAYS* more than enough.

It always leads to blessing,

And the creation of a beloved community!

It’s not easy to give our ourselves,

We are all tempted to *hoard and save.*

But by giving what we have,

we learn that *our basket of bread and fish* can actually feed a crowd!

And *our bank account* has life-changing power—

to make a difference in this world!

THAT is the mosaic masterpiece!

Friends, *God uses our resources!*

When we are willing to *give* what we have,
Even if we feel like it's *not enough*,
Even when we're *afraid to share*,
Even if we believe *we can't make a difference---*
God uses our resources....and the result is a masterpiece!

Friends, that is the *Good News of the Gospel*.
May we bring our resources,
and witness the power of Jesus to multiply it all!
And for this, all God's people say together, Amen