

August 6, 2017: Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 14:13-21: More Than Enough

It's great to be here with you this morning. Lately it seems I have been absent about as much as I have been present. It hasn't all been about vacation. The first two were, but last Sunday I went to the beach with the teens. That was not a vacation. Don't get me wrong, it was a lot of fun. We have a really great group of teens. But it was hardly relaxing.

I'll go ahead and tell you now, I'll be gone again in a couple weeks. But it should be the last time in a long time. After that I have only one more Sunday that I can take off for the entire year. I know I have been away a lot. And I really appreciate the fact that none of you have given me a hard time about it. If only that were true. I really don't mind the jokes, but a few weeks ago somebody went too far.

I was working here at the church. I got up from my office to use the restroom and noticed a Guilford County Sheriff's Deputy parked outside. The officer was standing behind my vehicle and writing down my license plate number. Naturally I was curious as to what he was doing so I opened the door and said hello. He came over, introduced himself, and asked me if I knew who the car belonged to. I told him it was mine. He explained there had been some burglaries of churches in the area and he was just checking it out because he drove by the church all the time and had never seen it here before. Somebody had to have put him up to that. I'm not sure who it was, but I have my suspicions.

Most full-time jobs offer some type of package that includes vacation days, sick days, personal days, etc. In some jobs you can bank those days, not use them, and then get paid for them at the end of the year or count them toward retirement. I don't have that option, but it's probably better that way, because, according to mental health professionals familiar with the type of work I do, I need to take them. I have a job where I serve others. According to the experts, when you have a job like that it's important to take time off to rest and experience renewal, so you can serve them well. If you don't, eventually you won't be able to serve them at all. So I guess what I'm saying is, I go on vacations for you guys. You are welcome.

The truth is, as followers of Jesus, we are all called to lives of service, to give of ourselves to meet the needs of others. We give of our time, our resources, our talents, and our physical and emotional energy. We don't all serve in the same way, but we are all called to serve. And serving can be exhausting. It can sap our strength. It can drain our last drop of energy. Let's just be honest, it can flat wear us out.

If you have ever served in any way, chances are you know what it is to come to that place where you feel as if you have nothing left to give, and that taking a break from whatever it is you are doing is your only option. If you have ever experienced this, then you have a sense of what the disciples were feeling, when Jesus told them they needed to feed this crowd of well over 5,000 people.

In Matthew's Gospel this event immediately follows the report of the gruesome death of John the Baptist. John had been imprisoned for publically condemning Herod for taking his brother's wife, Herodias, as his own. Herodias eventually persuaded Herod to have John beheaded. Jesus was so overwhelmed by the news he set out by boat, seeking a place of solitude, where he could be alone with his thoughts and spend time in prayer. But the crowds wouldn't have it.

Anticipating where he might be headed, they followed him there on foot, arriving the same time he did. Jesus' compassion for the crowd and his commitment to the will of his heavenly Father, compelled him to put his own needs aside so that he could minister to their needs. As evening fell his disciples urged him to send the crowds away into nearby villages to find food. Jesus insisted it wasn't necessary; that they could take care of them.

We can read between the lines here. On the surface the disciples' argument was, "we are in the middle of nowhere, and it's late." Both of which were true. But it's not going too far to suggest it was also a reflection of the way they were feeling. They had nothing left to give these needy crowds. Their resources were depleted. They didn't have enough to feed them. They were tired. They were weary. They just needed a break. Jesus told them they could handle it. So they got honest with him, "All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish. We can't do it Jesus." And he said, "Bring them to me."

We know what happened next. Jesus somehow multiplied the loaves and fish. The disciples distributed them to the crowd, consisting of well over five thousand people. Some speculate the number could have been as high as twenty-thousand. All ate until they were satisfied. The disciples then gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers. It was nothing short of a miracle. And such a memorable experience for the disciples that it became one of the few stories that can be found in all four Gospels.

The experience taught them two powerful lessons...

First, it taught them that they served a God with unlimited resources. Their God had created all there is, seen and unseen. It all belongs to him. The 50th Psalm comes to mind, where God said, "¹⁰For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine."

With all this at his disposal, and more if he chose to create it, God could enable them to do whatever it was he was asking them to do, even when they had reached the end of themselves. All they had to do was take what little they had, place it in God's hands, and he would bless it, and multiply it, to accomplish his purposes.

The second lesson it taught them was that the God they served always provided more than enough of whatever it was they needed. Not only was there enough food for the disciples and all those who had gathered there. There were leftovers. Many more could have shown up after the food was distributed, and there still would have been enough. There is always room for one more at God's table.

It will also do us well to take these two lessons to heart.

As I mentioned a few moments ago, God has called all of us to lives of service. Sometimes we are called to serve in big ways. Most of the time we are called to serve in small ways. What is it that God has called you to? Are you open to the many ways the Holy Spirit can speak to you? He speaks to us through his Word, through our fellow believers, through the desires he has given us. Are to listening to what he is saying? What acts of service has God laid upon your heart to do?

You might be thinking there just isn't time in your life, or energy, to add anything more to what you are already doing. I know that many of you are serving in so many different ways already. It's possible you

may need to stop doing some things, even good things, to make room for other things. In a small church it's common for people to serve because they see a need, not because they sense a call.

The distinction is important, because it's only when we are doing something God has called us to do that we can know he will give us whatever we need to accomplish it. Doing things, we are not called to do is fine for a time, but eventually those things will leave us feeling tired, frustrated, and burned out. Doing things, we are called to do can almost have the opposite effect. We may still get physically tired, but they almost seem to energize our spirits, giving us a sense of fulfillment and filling our hearts with Joy.

And we can expect him to call us to do things well beyond the realm of our abilities and resources. He will supply what we need. All he asks is that we give him all that we have, no matter how small, and he will multiply it to accomplish his purposes. This is true all our attempts to be the people God created us to be. What ever we need from him; more grace, more faith, more wisdom, more strength, he will give it to us. All we need to do is ask.

Whatever we ask for in faith, according to his will, he will do. And remember this is a God with unlimited resources. As the words of our opening hymn reminded us, "His love has no limit, his grace has no measure, his power has no boundary known unto men. For out of his infinite riches in Jesus, he giveth, and giveth, and giveth again."

This lesson also has some bearing on all of us collectively, "What is it that God is calling our church to do?" As I understand it, the fundraiser dinner we hosted last night was a first for our church, at least on that scale. Some of you had a few anxious moments, wondering if we could pull it off. From nearly any perspective it was a huge success. So many people gave their best to make it happen. But we must give God the glory. He was working behind the scenes, multiplying our efforts to make it happen. Because I believe it was something he called our church to do.

For some time, it's been a dream of many in this church to construct a new fellowship hall. We are closer now than we have ever been before. But we are finding that buildings like the kind we need cost more money than we want to spend. But if God is calling us to do this; if we believe this is something he wants us to do so we can minister to our community more effectively, this story should encourage us to step out on faith, believing that with God, anything is possible.

The second lesson challenges us to consider what we are doing with the leftovers of God's grace in our life? God continues to pour out his grace upon us. He has blessed us in so many ways. Our cups are overflowing. We have grace coming out of our ears, ready to be shared, ready to be given away. We are full, but others are hungry. Are we giving our leftovers to them?

This week I was amazed at the ways in which so many in our congregation gave some of their leftovers to help a family in need, a family that was hurting, a family that was in mourning. There are many things that churches can be known for. We are certainly known for our barbecue and chicken pie suppers. That's not a bad thing. But what if the first thing that came to people's minds when they heard the name Brick Church were words like "generous," "compassionate," and "loving." That would surely give God glory.

There is a song called “More Than Enough.” You may have heard it before. In just a moment we are going to listen to it. The words will be on the screen. It’s a reminder of how much grace we have received. I hope it encourages us to share it with others.