

## **“Jars of Meal, Baskets of Grace”**

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11-5-17 Stewardship Sunday

Based upon 1 Kings 17: 8-16; Mark 6:34-44; 8:14, 17-21

According to Presbyterian theology, a sacrament is something that Jesus both did himself and commanded that we also do, which serves as a God-given means of grace for humankind. The holy meal that we call the Lord’s Supper, which we will share later in the service, is a sacrament for example, because Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup, and also commanded that his disciples do the same. But before we reenact that meal according to his command today, I want us to think about another famous bread-breaking meal, the one described in today’s gospel lesson. The meal that day in Galilee was also a simple one: just some bread and dried fish, and it was also a means of grace for the thousands who got to eat that day who otherwise would have had nothing. But instead of inspiring a sacrament in the Church to strengthen those of us who call ourselves Christ’s disciples, the story of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 has been cited repeatedly in support of a different Church practice which feeds disciples and non-Christians alike. The practice is called stewardship.

We tend to think about stewardship in terms of money, because every year during stewardship season we try to raise money for the operating budget of the church. But although using our money to support God’s ministries in the Church is a critical part of stewardship, the spiritual discipline of stewardship is ultimately about far more than money. It’s about our recognizing that all that we have ultimately comes from God even if we have worked hard to earn it ourselves. It’s about giving out of gratitude, not in order to get something, recognizing that, “From those who have much, much is required,” (Luke 12:48). Basically, stewardship is one of the ways that we live out the two great commandments: to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We give our money, our time, and our talents to demonstrate that we love God more than our stuff or ourselves, and that we truly love our neighbors as ourselves. We give as part of the lifelong conversion process I spoke about last week, because doing so turns us away from the world’s “What’s in it for me?” culture toward the Lord’s “What’s in me for them?” way. When we are good stewards of all that God has given us, then we end up living sacramentally in the sense that by doing as Christ did and commanded that we also do, we become a means of grace for our world.

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus commanded his disciples when they pointed out that the crowds following them around were getting restless with hunger. “Ah excuse me?” they said. “You’re kidding right? Are you under the impression that we are all carrying around almost a year’s worth of spare cash hidden in our underwear just in case we might need to buy a city’s worth of people refreshments?” Mark’s gospel says that Jesus put the disciples in this awkward position not just once, but twice, once when there was a crowd of 5,000 gathered and a second time when there was a crowd of 4,000. Those numbers are big enough for us to understand how impossible and absurd the task must have seemed to Jesus’ disciples, but they don’t convey how much worse it was than that because in those days only men were included in a head count. (I know, I know, don’t get me started!) But most scholars agree that women and children must have been in the crowds too. So realistically, the first crowd probably had

10-15,000 people, and the second 8-12,000. If you want to put yourself in the disciples' shoes, therefore, just imagine that you are in D.C. on the day of a political rally with crowds stretching from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, or maybe even to the Lincoln Memorial, and then Jesus tells you to feed everyone with the 5 bagels and lox you had just picked up at Panera's. "Yeah right!" you would have said just like they did, because Jesus' command would have seemed equally ludicrous. Even if everyone took the tiniest pinch off your meal, it still would be impossible for you to feed everyone.

The widow of Zarephath probably wanted to say, "Yeah right" also, even though God told her to feed only one person, the prophet Elijah, when he showed up on her doorstep. One person doesn't seem unreasonable until you consider that she and her son were dying of starvation during a famine. They were down to their last jar of meal, from which she had planned to make one pathetic last pancake to eat before they died. But then God had the nerve to tell her through Elijah that she was supposed to give those last precious, few bites to the wild-eyed stranger in a hairy jacket, who practiced a different faith and came from a different land, just because he showed up on her doorstep. It wasn't that it was impossible for her to give away what she had; it was that it was totally unfair. She had so little! Why couldn't God have seen that she did not have enough to share and sent Elijah down the street to bother someone else?

But to her complete surprise, the widow discovered that God's demand upon her to give of what she had for the care of another was actually God's way of giving her the saving grace she needed to survive. As long as she fed Elijah, the jar never ran out of meal. As long as she used what she had to serve God, she and her son and Elijah would have enough. The disciples made a similar discovery when they shared from their limited resources to fulfill Jesus' command to feed others. Suddenly they were not only able to feed thousands, they also had enough to create leftovers—twelve baskets the first time and seven the second. The impossible became the possible, and not enough became more than enough when they were good stewards of what they had. This is the miracle of how God's grace works. When we use what we have for the sake of furthering God's kingdom, sharing what we have with our neighbors, God both takes care of us, and makes what we give for others go farther than we can imagine could be possible. So we all are blessed.

We have seen this happen repeatedly here at Prince of Peace. Ever since I came almost five years ago this church has had a deficit budget, which means that we have begun each year as a church believing that we did not have enough to do God's ministry in the way we wanted. Yet not only has that never stopped us from doing great things in and outside the church, somehow, miraculously, when we have needed more money for something or some cause we love, we have always ended up discovering that we have far more to give than we originally assessed. When we have needed the money for huge unbudgeted expenses— a new roof, new HVAC system, and new fire alarm system, we all found it in our own budgets and made these improvements happen. When the news has brought us the cries of victims of multiple disasters, we haven't said, "Sorry, can't help." We have looked at our comparative abundance and realized that we indeed did have the money to help.

I asked Mission Elder, Lillian Van Rompay, to put together a list of what we have been able to accomplish in our mission ministry through our giving just this past year, and these are some of the things she listed:

- Because of our work and our contributions, six second-graders improved their reading and six more are on the way with our STAIR program. This doesn't mean simply that they will have an easier time reading in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Statistically it means that they are far less likely to drop out of high school and experience all the negative consequences that come from doing that. We have changed their lives and their futures with the gifts of our time, talents, and resources.
- Because of us, a family was able to move into their own home for the first time, and another one is beginning the journey toward home ownership through Habitat for Humanity.
- Because of us, 700 people were able to have lunch at the Light House Shelter.
- Because of us, hundreds of people were able to have a home-cooked meal at Sarah's House, and in February, also to receive our love in the form of Valentine's cookies.
- Because of us, children who depend upon the CCCC Food Pantry were able to choose a book to feed their minds along with their food, much of which we also provided, to feed their bodies.
- Because of us, almost \$7,000 was sent around the nation and the world through Baltimore Presbytery and the General Assembly Mission fund to provide disaster relief, education, peacemaking initiatives, self-development of people initiatives, and other programs.
- Because of us, 25 families who feel like the widow of Zarephath most of the time were able to enjoy Thanksgiving feasts and Christmas presents, six families were able to keep their electricity and heat from being shut off, and 20 students were able to begin the school year without worrying that they wouldn't have the supplies they needed to learn.

You see what God can do through us! This list doesn't even name all the people who have been connected to God because of our worship services and educational programs, or the pastoral care that has been extended to people who otherwise might feel overwhelmed and alone. It also doesn't name the many we don't know about how were blessed by the baskets of grace created by our reaching out. Although at times it seemed impossible, given the size and age of our congregation and the size of our budget, to do these things, we did it. Do you know why? It's partly because of your generosity and faithfulness, of course, but it's also because we never do ministry alone when we give through the Church. My loaves and fish and your loaves and fish are combined together, and then multiplied a thousand-fold by God's grace. Therefore, we never need to fear that we won't have enough to care for ourselves if we care for others.

The disciples didn't understand this. Even after two miraculous meals, they were still afraid of not enough, which was why Jesus was so frustrated with them. "They forgot" as

pastor/author Nadia Bolz-Weber put it, in her book, our next book group book, “that they [had] a God who created who created the universe out of “nothing,” that can put flesh on dry bones, “nothing,” that can put life in a dusty womb “nothing...” “[N]othing” is God’s favorite material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant, and worthless, and says, “Ha! Now *that* I can do something with.”<sup>1</sup>

But here’s a critical difference between us and the first disciples, and us and much of the rest of the world, we have way more than nothing. We are among the privileged and protected in the world. We also have 50 years of history, not just the stories of two miraculous meals to help us remember and appreciate the lesson that we can do amazing things with God’s help when we open our eyes to the abundance we have and give to the needs of others through the Church. So instead of focusing on how little we think we have or how impossible the task seems, this year let’s think about what we could do for Christ if we all just recognized the great need, our divine calling, and the astounding power of the grace of God.

A while back a movie came out called *It Could Happen to You*, about a New York policeman who doesn’t have enough money to tip his waitress one day when he eats lunch in a diner. So, he promises her that if he wins the lottery, he will split half of what he gets. “Yea right,” the waitress says. Then he wins. While the policeman’s wife then spends all her time thinking about the stuff she could buy for herself with the money, the policeman and the waitress find their greatest joy in thinking about how they can be generous and gracious to others. They take a bunch of poor street kids to a major league stadium and let them play ball there. They pay the subway fares of a whole bunch of tired commuters on their way home one night. They endow a table at the diner where homeless people can come to eat for free. And they have a ball doing it.

As far as I know no one has won the lottery and decided to give all the money to our church. But we can still bless others as if we had with the help of God’s grace. Maybe we could double the number of children we help. Maybe we could not only feed the hungry and the local homeless, we could also provide a life and a future to a refugee or immigrant family. Maybe we could fund an after-school program for kids or use our time and talents to combat racism. Maybe we could expand the music program in the church or bring in famous guest preachers to inspire us. Oh, just think of the things we could do!

You have been asked for the past few weeks to dream big dreams this year. Well let me tell you some of mine. I dream of seeing another generation of children raised to know love, and serve Christ through this church. I dream of us becoming even more expressly a refuge for the people of the world who are constantly told they aren’t welcome or loved by God. I dream of us growing and thriving because we invest more of our time and money in working in and for the community than we do in carrying for our building or ourselves. I do not know how to make those dreams come true or if they ever will. But I do know that they are dreams worth funding. I also believe that there is more work for this church to do, work that God both expects us to do, and will enable us to do if we respond to Christ’s call.

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<sup>1</sup> Bolz-Weber, Nadia, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 106.

I wish that I could bring in a STAIR graduate from 20 years down the road to speak to us before we pledge next week. It would also be amazing if we could bring in someone whose jar of meal didn't run out because once a month we toss our loose change in baskets held by our children. It would be inspiring if we could track down all the people who have found joy because of our little bitty library, or hope because of our support of CCCC, or inspiration because of our worship services. One of the unfortunately realities of giving to an operating budget instead of a capital campaign is that you rarely get to see just what a huge impact your contributions have made in the lives of others. All you get to do is contribute to the meal, trusting that God will make it go farther than you can imagine. But ministry is not about doing things to make ourselves feel good. It's about doing things to help others out of love for and gratitude to God.

Nelson Mandela once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done."<sup>2</sup> But the lesson of the widow of Zarephath, the story of the feeding of the 5,000, and our own history is that nothing is impossible for God. So, in this next week, instead of telling yourself you don't have enough time, talent, or money to make a difference, try to think instead about stewardship in terms of winning the lottery because we have all won in Christ. We have been given all we need and more through Christ, and not because of our own doing, but because of the love and grace of God. That windfall makes us both qualified and called to live sacramentally, to do as Christ did and commanded, caring for others in God's name. If Christ made it so that a handful of bread and fish could feed tens of thousands, just imagine what Christ could accomplish through us if the starter meal we gave him to work with were larger. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted at *25 Quotes To Inspire You To Do The Impossible*, <https://impossiblehq.com/25-impossible-quotes>, retrieved Nov. 11, 2017.