

“When ‘Nothing’ Is More than Enough”

By Rev. Mary D. Gaut, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

August 2, 2020

Based upon Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 13:13-21

In this strange time of pandemic, when so many of the normal summer pleasures are off limits, many people are rediscovering the pleasures of reading. While the summer reading list for school aged people and the beach reading for the rest of us have long been staples of the season, most often we were reaching for something we hadn't read before. The summer reading list was handpicked by teachers who, our childhood selves imagined, took a devilish pleasure in picking books we would never pick ourselves. The beach reads then must be our grown-up revenge.... our little guilty pleasures that elevate plot over exquisite prose. But in almost every case, our summer reading tended to be focused on books new to us.

So, I've found it somewhat amusing that more than a few columns and essays this year suggested that the summer of pandemic is a perfect time for RE-reading certain books. Generally, the suggestion is a book considered classic. Almost anything Jane Austen wrote makes the list along with the only one J. D. Salinger is known for. The Wall Street Journal this week suggested that I might want to revisit "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and there is an almost universal agreement that one can never go wrong rereading *The Great Gatsby*.

The point is that the genuinely great stories are those that have a depth of meaning that cannot be grasped on first reading, and insights that are only appreciated as we become more seasoned travelers along life's journey. Sometimes reading an old story in a new and perhaps more challenging context, like a pandemic, can reveal lessons and encouragement that have withstood the test of time, and offer mental and spiritual nourishment that more trivial reads never even aspire to.

Today's Gospel lesson falls into the category of stories worth rereading. Indeed, the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 shows up regularly in the summer lectionary readings. It is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels, though each of the Gospel writers places it in a slightly different place in the longer story of Jesus. Mark told it first. Matthew and Luke, after reading Mark, thought it important enough to include in their Gospels. And John, so different in so many ways from the other Gospels still includes this story. Through the ages followers of Jesus have mined its riches without ever declaring "we are done now. There is no more to say."

I will not even pretend to have a radically different interpretation of this powerful story that shows up on the Church's summer reading list. What I CAN do is invite you to step into the story with me so that maybe you can hear what you need to hear at this season of your life and the world... rereading... rehearsing... an old familiar story that still has lessons to teach.

In Matthew's telling this story follows one of the most difficult moments in Jesus life. He places it shortly after Jesus learned that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded. Imagine how he felt at the news of this horrific act. This was a turbulent and scary time, especially for the Jewish people. And Jesus' ministry and all those connected with it were increasingly in the crosshairs of the empire. So, Jesus went out in a boat by himself. Matthew doesn't say he went to pray though we can be sure he did. No, we can imagine that he went mostly to grieve... to cry... to pound the wood in frustration and fear? How do you imagine Jesus in that boat... drifting out there all alone with the knowledge of what has happened? How might you be feeling?

Eventually, though, he must come ashore... only to find that crowds of people had gathered, each one needing something from him... needing to hear his teaching and preaching... his healing touch. They need his hope... his faith in God. As tired and drained as he must have felt he had compassion and responded to their needs. That's Jesus.

But by late afternoon he had to be tired AND hungry and so were the crowds. The disciples who had joined him on the lakeshore were too. And thinking practically they know it's time to bring this rally to an end so that people can go into the villages and get food.... so, THEY could go into the village and eat. Even disciples... even Jesus... needs to eat. If the story ended there it would still teach us a great deal about the nature of Jesus ministry in a time of chaos and fear. But then Jesus, bone tired and still grieving tells his disciples... "YOU feed them."

And here is where I try to put myself in this story, for I'm a disciple of Jesus too. And Jesus continues to say to me and to us, as he did to Peter on that post-resurrection beach encounter, "Feed my sheep." Whatever hunger is out there Jesus asks us to respond. And my first reaction is exactly like those long ago disciples: "Jesus....I've got nothing. Really. OK...maybe a couple of fish...maybe a couple of hours.... maybe a couple of dollars.. But really, against the magnitude of the needs it may as well be nothing." Does Jesus agree. Does he look at us and realize that we do not have what it takes to be entrusted with his ministry in a hurting world?

You know the answer, of course. And Jesus takes what they have... what they consider “nothing” really. And he blesses it, and he sends them back into the crowd. And maybe he takes a desperately needed nap there on the cool grass as a miracle of turning “nothing” into abundance forever alters the disciples understanding of what is possible. No wonder all four Gospel writers include it.

I think that we can hear the good news of this Gospel best when we clearly see ourselves in this story. In the face of so many demands on us as both individuals and as church we feel like what we have to offer is next to nothing. Maybe you are a caregiver and stretched to the breaking point, or a parent suddenly confronted with the needs of children when their lives are being lived virtually. Maybe you look around at what is happening in our world... the violence, the racism... and wonder what you have to offer that will really and truly make a difference. As church we have been hurled into a new reality brought on by a pandemic for which we feel we are not prepared. Jesus... we’ve got nothing. Except... And then, in faith, we offer the gifts that we have.... we offer them and seek God’s blessing.... we offer them in a posture of openness and expectation to the Spirit’s creative movement among us... and then be ready to be amazed at how our understanding of what is possible is forever altered.

No, it’s not always easy. No, we don’t say the magic words and everything falls neatly into place in a way we can always see. Discipleship is demanding. It requires us to offer gifts that we think are inadequate to partner with God to do impossible things. We come to the end of this story of the feeding of the multitude and we are left at the edge of mystery and awe at what God can do with our “nothing.” Yes, this story undoubtedly includes an assumption about how the crowd shared what they had and even that can be a miracle. But the Gospels don’t include that because this is a bigger story. In the end it is about how God enters our very human condition and then, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, is “by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” May it be so... even now. Amen.

Mary D Gaut
All rights reserved