

“To Be Seen and Heard”

Matthew 14:13-21

**Part II of VI in the Summer Sermon Series,
“The New Social Gospel”**

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From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: O Holy One, center our spirits and open our hearts to receive Your Word for us this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

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What a privilege it is to be able to preach from this historic pulpit from which the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden preached the Social Gospel for **36 years** while he served First Church as the pastor from 1882-1918.

And so, today, on the second Sunday of this six-week sermon series called ***The New Social Gospel***, we continue to lift up the message of the Social Gospel – and the love of neighbor and a theology of inclusion and – as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached – his vision of the “Beloved Community.”

Before I get started, I also want to take a moment to thank all of those who are helping to move this beautiful – ***and heavy*** – pulpit each week, back and forth, from Parish Hall to the sanctuary – because this past week, this pulpit even took a field trip, so to speak, outdoors, to the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park where First Church hosted an Interfaith Press Conference in opposition to Issue 1.

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Our Gospel reading this morning doesn't need much of an introduction, does it – this is the foundational story of our faith tradition that is often referred to as *The Loaves and the Fishes*.

- In fact, **this story** is the **only miracle story** that appears in *all four of the Gospels!*
- It is a story that captures the attention and imagination of even the youngest children.
- And it is s a story that is even known and referenced outside of the Christian tradition.

For instance, for several years, I was a volunteer organizer for one of the Produce Giveaways of the Mid-Ohio Foodbank and, sometimes, at the end of our events, the other volunteers and I would be simply *amazed* that we had **more than enough** fruits and vegetables for the very long lines of our market-goers – **especially** since the need has been so great here in Central Ohio in recent years! And, in response, the other volunteers would often make references to the miracle of being able to “feed the multitudes.”

And so, with a Bible story as familiar as this one, is it even possible to hear it again – with new ears or in a spirit of openness and wonder?

After all, could there **BE** any other interpretations of this well-known and foundational story of our faith tradition?

Well, many years ago – almost *20 years* ago now – I heard an interpretation of this text that I had never heard before!

Now, at that time, our family had been living in Dallas, Texas, and one Sunday, our guest preacher – at our UCC church – was a local social justice activist and Catholic nun – and her interpretation of this very familiar miracle story has stayed with me ever since (which I'll share with you in just a moment).

But first, some background information about our Gospel reading for today...

Now, as you may recall, this story takes place *immediately* **after** Jesus had received the devastating news that his dear friend and cousin and fellow evangelist, John the Baptist, had been beheaded as ordered by King Herod.

And so, in response, Jesus – who was clearly grief-stricken – and who had already had a very long day of teaching and healing – understandably withdrew and retreated to a deserted place for prayer and solitude.

However, it was no surprise that the crowds – who were hungering for more of Jesus’ presence and instruction and inspiration and healing and teaching and preaching -- followed him right straight there to the deserted place to which he had fled!

And what was Jesus’ response to the people? He graciously received the crowds with patience and compassion and understanding – and met them in all their need.

And then, before you know it, the hour had become late – and the crowds had grown to more than 5,000 people (according to the Gospel writer of Matthew) – and so, of course, they had become hungry and possibly *even* **HANGRY** as they say these days (that’s hungry + angry put together – hangry)!

And **meanwhile**, the disciples were becoming increasingly anxious – understandably so – about the apparent lack of food for the multitudes.

And so, the disciples then approached Jesus about their growing concern and the possible crisis in their midst!

And what was Jesus’ response?

Well, it was clear and direct and practical! And Jesus said to the disciples, “Well, then, give them something to eat!”

And, of course, the disciples then responded, “*But Jesus, we have NOTHING here but five loaves and two fish!*”

And, in that moment, Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish – and looked up toward heaven, blessed the food, and gave it to the disciples – who then distributed the loaves and the fishes to the multitudes.

And, as it turned out, there was, indeed, an abundance of food – after all! And that crowd of 5,000-plus was fed and even filled – *and there were still twelve baskets of food left over!*

Now, I’m guessing that this telling in Matthew’s account of this miracle story may be close to your understanding – and what we’ve all been taught throughout the years.

But **what if** there is more to the story than is written?

This is where the interpretation of the Catholic nun comes in ...

Now, I must say that she didn’t subtract anything from this familiar interpretation of the **feeding of the multitudes** – but she did add to it -- by providing some narrative to the untold parts of the story.

And **she** emphasized that if the women **had been** there – as it written -- then, of course, **they** were well-prepared for all circumstances and any scenario!

Remember, in the last verse of our reading today, verse 21, the Gospel writer of Matthew writes:

And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The women were there, indeed!

Now, let me just ask you this question...

Do you *really think* that a mother or a grandmother or an auntie – then or today – would actually take their little ones out into the public square – for

an indefinite amount of time – **without** all the provisions that they might possibly need for any given scenario?

When I heard this sermon all those years ago, I actually laughed out loud as I sat there, in the pew, with our then-three young children: Martin and Ingrid and Emmett ... because as I glanced into our open diaper bag that was right there – at my side and – in addition to diapers and wet wipes – it also included sippy cups, graham crackers, bananas, and children’s books and crayons and coloring pages and my car keys and wallet and even this kinda new thing called a *cell phone* (which I really didn’t use that often back then!).

Of course, the women in Jesus’ time were ready and prepared – just as parents and grandparents and caregivers of young children are ready and prepared today – *whenever* they leave the house with their families!

In her book called *Not Counting Women and Children*, author Megan McKenna asserts that not only were the women present in Matthew’s account of the **Feeding of the Multitudes** but, of course, **the women** were the ones who had taken care to pack provisions in their baskets when their families set out to see and hear Jesus preach and teach that day.

And *because* of the women’s planning and provision, the disciples were then able to produce the loaves and fishes to feed the crowds, there, in the desert.

And, perhaps even more than that, **the example** of the women certainly inspired generosity among the multitudes that day – so much so that all the people shared with one another – and **everyone** ate and was filled ... and even had twelve baskets of leftovers!

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Now, what I have described, here, is actually inspired by an ancient spiritual practice of engaging with Scripture – by using our imaginations to fill in the gaps of the untold parts of the story.

It is an approach to reading the Bible which may – or may not – work for you.

But what this contemplative practice **does** do – for all of us – I hope – is to remind us that there are *always* significant parts of every story that remain unheard and untold by those who are often unseen – and almost always – it is those with the least amount of power or influence in our society.

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As we put our text for today into conversation with our **broader context today** – how does it speak to **you**?

And what does it say to **all of us** as followers of Jesus?

In this highly charged political climate, right here and right now, in Ohio – at this critical moment in our constitutional history, I ask you:

- whose are the faces that are at risk for being obscured?
- whose are the voices that are at risk for being diminished?
- and whose is the political power that is currently at risk for being diluted?

I close this morning with some words of wisdom from the Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan, Jr. who is the Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches and a dear friend of First Church.

Dr. Sullivan shared these words at the Interfaith Press Conference in our Washington Gladden Social Justice Park earlier this week:

*Our faith forebears recognize
that when people are equipped to act in ways
that illustrate that **their voice matters**,
their dignity rises, and they are fundamentally empowered and strengthened.*

*This dignity and empowerment lie at the heart of Jesus Christ –
that **all** may flourish and have abundant life.*

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

