

Pentecost 12
August 3, 2008
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

Matthew tells us that Jesus has heard the news of his cousin John the Baptist's death at the hands of Herod. Jesus decides to go apart by himself to collect his thoughts and just be still with God. Getting in a boat Jesus goes to a deserted place. When the people heard where he was going they followed him on foot. Rather than be angry that he was followed, Jesus had compassion and spent the afternoon healing their sick.

It is growing late and the disciples are getting antsy. The disciples are hungry so it only makes sense the large crowd that has gathered around Jesus is hungry as well and there were limited resources. The disciples go to Jesus and say to him, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus responds, "They need not go away, you give them something to eat." "Ah Jesus, in case you have forgotten where we are; there is nowhere here for us to get food for so many people. Between us we only have five loaves and two fish. Five loaves and two fish are not going to feed this crowd." Jesus says to the disciples, "Bring them here to me." So, Jesus takes the disciples' meager offering and there is enough. In fact, there is more than enough.

Scarcity in the face of great need is contrasted in this story with the extravagant abundance of God. Note the story does not end with "and all ate." That, in and of itself, would be a miracle, but Matthew adds, "they all ate and were filled."

The story does not end there either. The disciples were told to gather up what was leftover and in doing so they filled 12 baskets. Extravagant abundance is the way it is with God.

If you recall, in his effort to help us understand something of who God is Jesus told many stories about extravagant abundance. Remember just a few weeks ago the story of the farmer who scattered too much seed? Some of the seed fell on good soil but lots of seed fell on bad soil yet, the farmer experienced an abundant harvest.

Remember the story of the father whose son asked for his inheritance so he could go make a life for himself apart from his father's household. The son goes and lives it up for a time. Soon he is out of money and working at a dirty minimum wage job feeding the pigs. He decides to go ask to work as a servant in his father's house because that would be better than what he is having to do to survive. The father does not just welcome back his son, he throws an extravagant party to welcome him home.

It wasn't that the Samaritan just stopped to help the man who had been robbed, beaten and thrown in a ditch. I am sure anyone of us would have done the same thing. It was how he stopped to care for the man. The Samaritan put the man in his car and took him to the hospital so he could be made well. He took out his wallet and said to the doctor, "Here is my credit card. Do what needs to be done to make this man well. I'll be back here in a week, if that is not enough money I'll pay you what you are owed." The Samaritan did not even know the man. In fact, the man was a Jew, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Don't you think this act of kindness is a bit over the top?

Jesus told stories of extravagant abundance and then added God is like that. God is like the farmer who sows seed without being worried about where it falls or if it is going to produce fruit. God is like the father who throws a party for his lost son. God is like the Samaritan who gives all so another may be made well.

So today we are told, Jesus goes off to be by himself. A crowd shows up and he has compassion on them. The crowd kept coming until there must have been thousands of them. Night is falling. What do you do with thousands of hungry people? "You feed them," Jesus says to his disciples.

Jesus invites his disciples to share by providing the extravagant abundance that is characteristic of our God. "How are we going to do that with five loaves and two fish?"

Fred Beuchner tells the story of a man who died and went to the place of the souls. There he was led to a banquet hall filled with tables laden with the most delicious looking food. The man was sure he had died and gone to heaven.

When the dinner bell rang, the inhabitants ran into the hall pushing and shoving to find a place at the table. Each person had a long spoon tied to each hand. The spoon was so long they could not feed themselves. Try as they might they could not get food to their mouths. Soon attendants came and drove them from the hall.

The newcomer realized that he was in hell. He begged to know what heaven is like. He was taken to another place that appeared very much like the banquet hall he had just been in. Again when the bell rang the inhabitants entered the hall with long spoons attached to each hand. But every person used the long spoon to feed his neighbor.

Fred writes, "Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside someone else's skin. It is the knowledge there can never be peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you too!"

Jesus says to disciples and to us, you have the capacity to be an agent of God's extravagant abundance. You have the gifts and resources to reach out to a world in need of food, shelter, medical attention, a world longing for peace and justice. Jesus challenges us to be part of the answer and not part of the problem.

Sometimes the answer cannot be bought it can only be shared out of the abundance with which God has blessed us. Sometimes it means emptying ourselves and stretching beyond what is comfortable to welcome another in the name of Jesus. Sometimes it means taking what we have, five loaves and two fish, offering them to God and watching for the blessing of extravagant abundance.

When all had been fed and were fulfilled, the disciples each gathered a basket full of leftovers enough to feed the world for centuries to come. Jesus invited them to share in his ministry by taking what they had been given and offering it in God's name.

God has surely blessed each of us with extravagant abundance. We are blessed to be part of a parish that has for over 250 years shared the good news of God in Jesus Christ in York and beyond. This week we told the story of God to 46 children and shared in their enthusiasm to learn to serve Jesus by serving others. This morning we are commissioning six of our members to go to Mississippi and assist those still suffering the effects of

hurricanes. Every day of the week we open our doors to our neighbors and community groups empowering people to improve their lives. All of these wonderful ministries depend on you and me to take our basket of leftovers from God's extravagant abundance and share with others.

You see the lesson in this story is not that there was enough, the lesson is there is more than enough. The good news is that all can be fed and all can know the joy we know if as followers of Jesus we share.