

“Hunger and Abundance”
by Rev. Barbara H. Gadon
First Unitarian Church of Wilmington
June 22, 2008

Readings: “If I Were to Teach a Course on God” by Rev. Nancy Schaffer, the Gospel of Mark 6:30-44

Sermon

Jesus and his people were on overload. They had been working day and night, healing the sick and helping whoever needed help. There was no leisure, the gospel says, not even enough leisure to eat. So they came to him, worn out, telling him about *all* they had done. Some of the gospels place this story right after the beheading of their beloved friend, John the Baptist, a wild man, and Jesus' first teacher. And so they were in grief, too. Jesus said, let's get in a boat, let's get away from all of this and rest. Just spend some time together. Sometimes when I've heard this story, I've thought this was where they were going to finally do the *spiritual* stuff – pray together, study Torah, really learn what God was about. I picture one of those spiritual vacations I see advertised in Robert's yoga magazines, with photogenic people in stylish yoga outfits (“available on our website”) posing on the beach in the Bahamas. Doesn't that sound spiritual to you? I think that may have been what was going through their minds.

So imagine, you step off your yoga cruise ship, ready for a little retreat on the velvety white sands, and... *everybody has followed you there*. They all want a piece of you. You or I might've found this mighty irritating, and looked for a place to hide. In the midst of our grief, our exhaustion, we probably would have been like the disciples who were ready to tell everyone to go home. In a nice way. But Jesus can't. He looks at the crowd of people gathering and feels – he can't help himself – compassion. I actually think that is the most important sentence in the story – Jesus looked at the crowd with compassion.

There probably *were* great crowds around him. Why? Well, I don't think it was for the reasons we are typically interested in Jesus today. I don't think it was simply because he provided great moral wisdom. In fact, I find some of his parables so puzzling and enigmatic, I sometimes think people followed him IN SPITE OF them. Remember that these were people who were incredibly poor, on the edge of survival. Dominic Crossan says that the Greek word used here was more like *destitute*. They were probably people who worked all day long pressing olive oil or tending sheep, and still struggled to have enough to eat. Why would you follow someone in this case – not

just to amuse yourself over your lunch break if you got one, but leave your work and go out with him all day? What did you get? Why did you bring your sick relatives or your own ailing body to be healed?

There was little in the way of medical help for the sick, no hospitals or clinics, and so they were all over the streets. I don't know what kind of healing Jesus and the disciples practiced. They may have been what we would call shamans today, which are still around in the many cultures that do not separate treatments for mind, body and spirit, as we do in the West. You may have your own theories. But I have to believe that they did people some tangible, significant good – or why would they have kept coming? I think going to Jesus and his disciples was like going to a free clinic, worship service, and soup kitchen, wrapped in one. These were people needing to be *fed* in some significant way. And people always need to be fed.

People today need to be fed, in greater numbers than we have seen in recent history. Food costs in real terms have reached their highest level in three decades, according to the New York Times. The price for staples, such as wheat and rice, have more than doubled in the past year and a half. Or there simply isn't any to be had. Food riots have broken out in 33 countries, like Camaroon, Haiti, Madagascar and Egypt, causing political destabilization, in addition to the more immediate suffering of starvation. An estimated 800 million people now go to bed hungry each night, a shocking number even for we who have somehow (not to our credit) learned to live with the knowledge of world hunger. The problem has escalated to the point that the UN summit which just took place in Rome, shifted its topic from climate change to the global food crisis. They came from their meeting, urging the world to help. And they did not have much agreement about how to achieve this.

The food crisis comes at a time when we're already feeling some overload about the problems of the world. When there are already several situations where we seem to have either no solution or no collective will to change in ways that would solve the problem. Global warming, the war in Iraq and other conflicts in the Middle East, the situation in Dar Fur, to name some. Psychologist and Unitarian Universalist author Mary Pipher says that now more than ever, we human beings go on overload with knowledge of problems of the world. We know about more things outside our immediate experience than ever before. (*Writing to Change the World*, by Mary Pipher) And while I wouldn't go back, I wouldn't want to have that more sheltered existence, it can be exhausting. It's harder than ever, I think, to look at the crowd coming at us with their need, to look at them with compassion.

Jesus sat down with the people, the story says, and he taught them many things.

And at a certain point, he realized how hungry they were. He must have felt the hunger in his own belly, having had “no leisure to eat”. The disciples suggested that perhaps the crowd should be dispersed to the “surrounding country and villages” go buy food for themselves. Such a reasonable suggestion. Except when you read that “this was a deserted place and the hour was very late”. Remember too that these were people who probably had no money. Just what did they think people were going to do? Jesus said, “No – you feed them.” And they, said, “Are we to go and buy 200 dinarii worth of bread?” One dinarius was a full day's wages, mind you. This was like saying, “a million dollars”. One should read this line, leaning hard on the sarcasm. (Thanks to J. Harry Feldman for this helpful bit of information.) They kept a collective purse - Jesus probably had a pretty good feel for the books for their operation. He would know they didn't have that much. They were sure they had him here.

He answered their question with a question – standard rabbinical technique – and asked, “How many loaves have you?” They answered, “five”, sure they had him now. And then, the miracle of the story goes, he broke and blessed the loaves, as one would make the *motsi*, the Jewish blessing on the bread, at dinner on Shabbat. He had everybody sit in neat rows of hundreds and fifties, and handed it all out. And there was enough for everyone, with 12 baskets worth of leftovers.

There are two general interpretations of this story. One is pure magic. Jesus waved his magic wand, and it was like steroids – everything just got bigger, or Jesus waved his wand and it was like rabbits, reproducing like crazy, turning the place into one big Costco, full of items in bulk.

The other way people interpret what happened is that it was a miraculous enlarging of people's hearts. They saw one boy who gave up his food for the crowd, and they reached into their bags, moved to share their own food.

The first one is not as bad as it sounds. To believe that, by faith in the creator, we could have an end to Hurricane Katrinas, an end to tsunamis, an end to this food shortage we're facing now. And many do great things for people to this day, believing they need emulate such a creator. Many food operatives are called “loaves and fishes”, and people in great numbers come forward to give. Alas, though, its violation of natural law simply makes it an untenable interpretation for most rational sorts, and makes it easy for us to dismiss the story out of hand. If we could all get what we prayed for, wrote a 19th century preacher, we would plunge the world into chaos.

I prefer the other interpretation. If I were to choose a miracle, it would be that people were somehow given eyes to see one another, and hearts that were connected by

their experience together. But this interpretation has problems, too. If people had truly brought lunch for themselves, why would they have looked so hungry to the rabbi? If they had come to him on impulse, as the story seems to imply, would they really have packed a picnic lunch, with enough to share around? Each of the six tellings, in all four gospels, paints an absolutely impossible situation. Each cries out for a miracle, any miracle.

For some time now, we've had some reliable miracles. Economic growth has been our solution to problems of poverty. "We're going to grow our way out of this mess," we keep hearing. Improved technology has been our magic wand. Environmentalist Bill McKibben, considers fossil fuels to be our greatest "miracle". They are powerful, remarkably easy to get, and highly concentrated. They replace human and animal effort. All of these miracles, in addition to causing things like pollution and global warming, have steadily declined the number of small farms in America. Did you know that before WW2, 60% of Americans were farmers? Now it's about 1%. The Census Bureau no longer has "farmer" listed in its section of occupations to check off. Oil has replaced farmers in the United States, says McKibben tartly. So has our increased desire for efficiency and productivity. Large chain stores have made it impossible for a small farmer to give them the price, quality and quantity – that would be a cheap, perfectly round tomato in great quantities – that they demand.

We are not very well connected to the food crisis, most of us, anyway, since in the US, we have never had food like we do now – cheap, plentiful, endlessly varied, available year-round. I was puzzled, growing up, when I would hear my Depression-era parents talk about getting an orange in their Christmas stocking. Big deal, I said, thinking about the bag full of oranges we had in our refrigerator, all year. We now spend about 11% of our budgets on food now; the generations before World War 2 spent 22%. And it comes from the rise of centralized, efficient production demanded by the large grocery stores. The one-stop shopping we love. It's hard for us to understand the impact on most of the world, which lives so differently.

Some of the reasons for the food crisis are natural: floods, droughts, and cold weather. But a fair number of them come as the result of the "miracles" of the modern age: the dominance of the market, industrialization, prosperity and a demand for growth and development. There's a higher demand for grain to feed livestock in China, where increasing affluence means more want to eat meat. There have been market jitters brought on by the sight of several countries stopping exporting grain; speculators seeing a chance to make money; and of course, the sudden extra demand for food crops such as maize for use in biofuels, in both Europe and the United States.

Rice-growing land in countries such as the Philippines is being lost to

industrialization and urbanization, while the growing appetite for meat and dairy products in Asia's burgeoning middle class is leading farmers to abandon rice growing.

The UN summit gave a lot of answers you might expect. Increase production. Remove trade barriers, give food and money to developing countries. They avoided completely the controversial topic of high American goals to produce biofuel from food crops. But other, more difficult answers are also being put forward.

The 2,500-page report the four-year International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development, backed by the World Bank and UN, did not push for big technical fixes. Much to the irritation of America and Europe. It came down on the side of “multi-functional” agriculture, which incorporates goals such as poverty reduction, water conservation and climate change adaptation alongside conventional efforts to increase production. It said that the biggest gains will come not from new “miracle crops” but from making existing science and technology available to the small-scale farmers responsible for tilling a third of the world's land surface. Only by helping them to feed themselves – partly by improving distribution and markets – will the challenges of sustainability, better health and poverty reduction be met. (London Telegraph, April 22, 2008)

What does this mean for us? There are a growing number of people urging us to re-think the gospel of endless economic growth, and endless technological growth. People like Bill McKibben counsel that smaller and simpler lives for everyone – if we could buy locally and buy less – rather than insist that everything keep getting bigger – would point the way out. I know that sounds about as likely as making giant loaves of bread and gigantic plates of fish with the flick of a wand. So many people would have to change in such fundamental ways. And yet, we're already seeing people's behavior start to change with the soaring gas prices. Seeing that big number four at the gas pump has already had an effect on us. People are conserving their travel, and organizing their errands. They're taking public transit. We are starting to see that oil has its limits. And that the price of biofuels – our most recent hope for leaving our consumption lifestyles intact – is costing the world its food supply, something we cannot conscience. We are in a loaves and fishes story right now, an impossible situation. What will it take for us to feed one another?

Back to the gospel story. In both Mark and John, the story is repeated, practically word for word, twice in a few pages. One time it's five thousand, the next time it's four thousand, but it happens twice within days of one another as the story unfolds. And once again, the disciples suggest that people be sent away; once again, they say that they don't have enough money. And it gives Jesus the opportunity to ask one of his very

favorite questions that he loves to ask the disciples: “Don't you get it?” As in: We did this before, just a couple days ago - don't you get it?

What's the “it” here, what is there to get? “Religion,” writes Sara Miles, “is not so much about swallowing beliefs, as it is about learning how to see.” (*Take this Bread*, by Sara Miles) See with the eyes of mercy, with the eyes of compassion. And what we must learn to see, again and again, is how intimately we are all connected. How one person's suffering is not so different from mine. The food crisis is asking this of us. It is asking us to see our neighbor, and feel their hunger. It's not an easy thing to look at.

I remember one time, I was asked by some friends to help them with their turn on the sandwich van, going to a designated place in their neighborhood and handing out sandwiches. People were collecting at the corner, I saw, and I suddenly felt tremendous fear and reluctance to open the doors. I felt the enormity of being one of the people inside the van, you see, handing out sandwiches, versus being the one on the sidewalk, in need. I suppose I felt guilty. Perhaps I even felt their suffering was contagious. Or something I did not want to know about. But once we started, I was surprised by how ordinary it felt. Some of them smiled, some didn't. Some of them looked at me, some kept talking to their friends and took the sandwich without looking. I could feel, for a moment, a very natural connection – I eat sandwiches, you eat sandwiches. I get hungry, you get hungry. We are not so different.

There are good people sitting at a few tables in the Parish Hall this coffee hour. David Weiss, who organizes our day serving at Emmanuel Dining Room, would love to have your help. You could take one or two days this next year helping to feed people in our name. It wouldn't solve the food crisis, but it might help you to remember that hunger is not far away, it's right here in Wilmington. And that hunger is a normal human condition. Bill Johnson will be sitting at a table for the Green Sanctuary, our most recent effort to help make us as a church a more responsible citizen in its consumption.

Those who told this story, were trying to do the same things. They found in it something of God, the holy, that source of love that we hunger for, that power inside us and among us that calls us to our best selves. They saw how closely this divine is connected to food. To actually feeding people's bodies, not just their souls. They saw how each of us is hungry. In Bishop Spong's words, “They needed words that were big enough to capture what they experienced.” (*Jesus for the Non-Religious* by John Spong) And they told this story – again and again and again. Don't we get it?

God is food, holiness is food, mercy is food, justice is food. But God does not appear unless we look at one another and connect on this very ordinary, human level.

The distribution of this God, found in food, is very much dependent on us. We must look at the crowd with compassion – or we will go hungry, too. Amen.