

Overflowing Baskets

John 6:1-11

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When a story shows up in every Gospel and even more than once in the same Gospel, it simply shows how important that story is. So it is with the feeding of the multitudes. That also means we have plenty of variations of the story from which we may choose. Though the primary story line is the same, some of the details differ. Today we are reading the story as it is told in John's Gospel.

What John's Gospel does is to place this sign as one among many that attracts people to follow Jesus. John has a love/hate relationship with signs; he recognizes people are initially attracted because of signs but hopes their faith is not sign-dependent. He wants them to walk by faith not by signs.

One of the unique aspects of John's story is that he sets it during the time of Jewish Passover. Not only does he say that directly, but the bread which he mentions is Barley – harvested at Passover.

Because of that John leaves us with a question that none of the other Gospels do: Why is Jesus in the Galilee during Passover and not making pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple? Similarly, why are the people with Jesus and not on pilgrimage themselves? Some have ventured that the Gospel of John was written after the destruction of the Temple, so reflects that perspective. John may also present the context in this way to make a statement - wherever Jesus is has become the new Temple.

The essential elements of the feeding of the multitude story are the same: A great crowd is gathered around Jesus and the disciples. It's time to eat and they have no way to provide a meal for a crowd of 5000 (or many more including women and children). Jesus implies the disciples should handle this. The disciples say they don't have the resources to do this. Another disciple says, "Look, here's a kid with five barley loaves and two fish." Jesus says to have them all sit down in the green grass. He blesses the bread in Jewish style and then they begin passing it out. They just keep passing and passing and there is enough to feed everyone.

After the meal they gather up the leftovers and they fill twelve baskets.

We get what this means, even intuitively: The task seems overwhelming, the resources appear scant, and yet we are co-responsible with Jesus for making it happen. What we don't know before we begin is that *Jesus caters*, he provides. The important thing is to begin with what is at hand – five loaves and two fish (a nice perfect number seven!) and trust God to make it bountiful. When we do – when we trust in God's provision the resources are multiplied, in fact so much so that it overflows into twelve baskets more (twelve for the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles, the whole people of God).

It's like a Habitat sale: You begin with five loaves and two fish of everything imaginable in peoples' garages and it multiplies into a sale that satisfies the multitudes. What are left over are not only twelve baskets of all the goods that weren't taken, but thousands in cash that will create even more new homes for people. If we are faithful, God provides.

We live in a time in which the dominant narrative is one of *fear and scarcity*: There is not enough, we can't share, others are a threat to my security, someone will take what is mine from me. We live in a time in which we are tempted to hoard the five loaves and two fish because we are driven by a fear of scarcity.

Over and against this dominant cultural narrative we have the counter-narrative of faith. Jesus says that together we can do this and there is more than enough. In fact, the resources are overflowing if we will trust.

In the church, among the beloved community, we have to decide which narrative will drive us – the narrative of fear and scarcity or the narrative of abundance and overflowing provision.

I was at a recent workshop on reading Jewish texts with Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine (Vanderbilt) and she shared an example from the parable of the prodigal son.

This parable is perhaps better titled The Waiting Father or The Two Sons. But in any case she began asking the same question in different cultural locations as to what the problem was with the younger son who ended up alone, impoverished and desperate. The typical answers from dominant western culture have been that he was selfish, sinful, and disrespectful.

But when she asked someone from Central America why the son had fallen on such hard times they answered, "Because he was separated from his family." And when she asked someone from an African country the same question, the answer was, "Because no one in the distant land shared."

Those perspectives change the way one understands that lost younger son, and for that matter all those who are lost. The new question becomes: How is that person connected? How does living and sharing in community provide enough for all?

It is much easier for a communal society to grasp this.

For us in the industrialized/technological world we moved to smaller and more isolated groupings as a part of our normal daily life. Long gone are the days of living in small village surrounded by extended family, a way of life in which it literally took a village to raise a child. The so called nuclear family is a very recent phenomenon, the product of people leaving rural areas and moving into industrialized cities for work. For hundreds of thousands of years human beings lived primarily in small agrarian tribes within a network of villages. That difference makes it harder for us to hear the story of the feeding of the multitudes and how God's economy works.

When we hear the story of the feeding of the multitudes and the overflowing provision and bounty of the feast, God is in the middle of that and the people are surrounding that great spiritual center as a community of faith and sharing. That's what makes all that possible: the spiritual source, relationship and connection. Then there is enough.

Isolation is the enemy of plenty and fear is the engine of isolation.

But we are not called to a spirit of fear. We are called to a spirit of faith and trust in the Lord. That makes all the difference.

Our community garden north of our building has over 200 garden plots we make available to people in our community each growing season. They sign up and we provide the water. And the community garden is a visible parable of how the zero sum game is a fiction.

People who are dominated by a zero sum notion of reality believe there is a fixed, finite, static pie of resources and our only choice is to slice this fixed pie into smaller and smaller slivers.

That zero sum notion of fixed resources contributes to our feeling of scarcity and that there is not enough. But when we actually look at our community garden we realize that resources are not fixed. To the contrary, they are multiplied, more is created, where there was nothing before except earth and water now there is growth, plenty and multiplication.

Our Creator God, the fruitful earth, and the work of our hands, all combine to bring about more. Out of five loaves and two fish the multitudes are fed.

The feeding of the multitudes story that shows up in every Gospel in our New Testament is the antidote to our zero sum world view. When we start to trust in the power of God's multiplication lives are changed. And when we start to trust that in the church we become less gripped by fear and free to open our generous hearts wide.

Think of the disciples who were faced with what seemed the impossible – feeding the multitudes. At first they are like flowers with closed petals, gathered up in a tight bud. But after the sharing and provision and overflowing ... they are like flowers open to the sun above. See how different they have become because of their experience of God's bountiful love. That's the love that transforms us.

I don't want you to leave today thinking that this is just another variation of the old story, *Stone Soup*. It is not.

In *Stone Soup* a clever man deceives the people into thinking that he can make a delicious soup just with water and some very special stones; their adding of other ingredients will just make it better. Of course, we know that the other ingredients *are* what make the soup, not the stones. If anything, the trickster uses imagination and cunning to bring everyone together.

That is not, however, the same as the story of the feeding of the multitudes. In the feeding of the multitudes Jesus is a sign of the kingdom, the great reminder that wherever Jesus is there is overflowing plenty, and when people of faith gather around him they live out of this overflowing bounty.

It is, of course, what we rehearse each and every Lord's Day at his table. This is our feeding of the multitudes, the place where a little goes a long way, and where the blessings are so bountiful that they overflow from the table to the church, and from the church into the world.