

“Where Shall We Get the Resources?”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
November 11, 2018

John 6:1-15

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Do you remember the hymn, “Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear; things I would ask him to tell me if he were here: Scenes by the wayside, Tales of the sea...” This is one of those stories.

Jesus and his disciples have landed on the east or maybe north shore of the Sea of Galilee. They actually didn’t travel very far. In fair weather, the crowds could have seen where they landed. Then it was an easy thing to travel on foot to rejoin them.

The disciples and Jesus have a short respite, but then Jesus sees the people coming. He leans over to Philip and asks, “Where can we buy bread to feed these people?” The text tells us that Jesus knows what he’s going to do. And he knows that his solution isn’t going to be an everyday, type solution.

Philip, though, is thinking in terms of Kwik Trip and Trig’s. He and the other disciples have been with Jesus for months, maybe years, but they’re still thinking along conventional lines. “If we pooled all our funds, we still couldn’t feed all of them!”

Andrew mentions a boy over there with a bit of food. Only the poorest people eat barley bread. A few moms were talking at dinner on Wednesday about how hungry youth can get when they don’t eat. When Jared was about twelve, I told him it was his responsibility to keep food on him at all times so that he wouldn’t bite someone’s head off when he’d been too long without a snack. Can’t you just imagine some 1st century mother reminding her boy to grab a couple sardines and some hand bread as he headed out the door?

Is Andrew suggesting that they use that little bit of food this poor youngster brought with him? What does he think? Have you ever felt frustrated when the Cancer Society and the Girl Scouts and the Church all ask for what you’d set aside for yourself?

The disciples don’t recognize the source of Jesus’ power, but he knows. Jesus knows that it’s not about having enough money. He knows that it’s not about having some barley loaves or fishes to act as seed for a great sharing. It’s not about him doing signs to get people to want to make him king.

Jesus is fully aware that what he does – what he’s about to do – is tap into God’s abundant resources. Jesus is so thoroughly plugged in to God and to God’s hopes and intentions for all people that to do anything other than to expect a miracle would never have occurred to him.

This– I believe – is the true miracle of loaves and fishes as well as of stewardship commitments, parking lot campaigns, Christmas programs, and revitalizations of any kind within the life of the church. We start with an everyday challenge. We may even start with common solutions, but somewhere along the way, a person notices God as Spirit nudging them, saying, “Hey, what about this? You need to think outside of the box here!”

And then, we think, “Oh, yeah, that’s right. This is God’s big thing. We don’t have to do it all ourselves.” The true miracle starts with trusting that God will do God’s great thing. All we have to do is come alongside God and do the part that is entrusted to us. It’s such a good feeling when you come to that realization, isn’t it?

If you’re thinking that you’ve missed the mark because you only ever think of the ordinary answers to the questions life throws at you, it’s time to let yourself off the hook. Remember – the disciples were with Jesus day in and day out and even they didn’t see that Jesus’ question was about Jesus rather than about where to get food.

They talk about the size of the crowd. They tell Jesus that conventional wisdom offers no solution. The joking reference to a poor child’s lunch is probably meant to deflect some of the panic the disciples are feeling as Jesus looks at them and they realize they don’t even understand the question, much less have a solution!

We can empathize with the disciples. It’s easy to fill our minds with conventional questions and look for conventional answers. We *need* more people to serve in our Personal Needs Closet. We *need* more money so we can restore the beauty of our stained glass window. We *need* more creativity and time to spruce up our spaces so they’ll look the way we want them to look.

Just like the disciples, we focus on details. We hear the questions from a “What do we do about this?” perspective, which is normal. So often, we forget that we *need* God to be a part of both the question and the answer. God is ready. We just forget to ask, “God, where are you in all of this?”

In our lesson today, Jesus reminds his disciples that he is a conduit for God. And that God is doing great things through him.

Jesus reminds us too. It’s all about God. Everything is all about God. Whenever we’re trying to decide as a church what to do with our time, our money, or our facilities and whenever you’re trying to discern what to do about your job or your time or other resources, we are at our best, we come up with our best answers, when we include God in the questioning and in the answering.

Do we see our church’s stewardship and do you see your home and family stewardship as survival or paying the bills? Or is our stewardship about making certain we have the tools we need in order to live into God’s vision for us?

This life – everything we do as individuals and families, everything we do as a church – is about relationships. We are our best selves when we remember that everything we do and everything we are is about relationships – with God, with ourselves and with others.

This is what stewardship is all about.

Last week I asked you to draw four concentric circles on your bulletin. This week I’ll draw them up here to remind us. We’re all represented in this large circle, everyone who is part of the church, from the youngest to the oldest, from the newest to the most senior.

Are you a person who – when the church talks about money – like Philip says, “No way! What little I could give won’t matter.” When you do give, do you give what’s left over?

Or maybe you see yourself in this second circle, calculating, “If each of us gave \$1000 then we could meet our budget easily!” Maybe you see giving to the church like paying dues: “I’ll pay my fair share.”

How does what you give lead you to grow in your relationships with God, yourself and your neighbor?

Maybe you used to give your dues to the church, but as you have continued your faith journey you’ve reached a place where you want to put God first. Maybe you want to try tithing, but how do you do that? Do you tithe on your gross or your take-home pay? Do you include insurance or bonuses?

People have different answers to these and other questions. When I was young and single, I moved the decimal point over on my annual teaching salary, divided by twelve and there it was. Later there were years when money was tight. Even when it wasn’t, my then-husband had different expectations for giving.

Aaron tithes but not on the money he puts into retirement. He will tithe on that when he finally withdraws it in ten or fifteen years. That makes sense and I’ve actually changed to a similar pattern.

Each fall, Dave and Barb looked at the numbers and prayed, and then made their pledge. After Dave died, Barb got behind in their giving. She finally called the church and explained that she

needed to make a change. I expect the church finance person there was as understanding of her changed situation as Martie would be here. Life is full of bad and good changes. We make a commitment and do our best to honor it, trusting God and trusting each other. But sometimes our ability to keep them changes. The church knows this; God knows this.

There's a fourth circle for people who are so grateful for all that God gives them that their question is, "How much *can* I give? How can I say thanks and make a difference for Christ in the world?"

I'm not there. Maybe you're not there either. But I've been asking myself questions these last two weeks, maybe you've been asking similar ones. How much does a new and unexpected friendship mean to me? How much do I value that my usually silent son noticed when I needed to talk and shared a texting conversation with me? How thankful am I for all the relationships we've begun together in the last year and a half?

As any of us start to ask such questions, our priorities begin to shift. We begin to understand that miracles – of long ago and in 21st century Wisconsin – happen when we practice letting God be at the center of our lives and as we open ourselves to letting God do God's great thing through us.

May it be so. Amen.