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Matthew 14:13-21

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**THE GOOD NEWS OF ABUNDANCE**

It's late in the day in a deserted place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples look across the crowd that Jesus has been teaching all afternoon. They decide that it is time for the people to eat. They assume that food is scarce, and that the only solution is to send the crowd away to surrounding villages to buy their dinners. Jesus makes a different assumption. He assumes that what the people need is abundantly available among them, and he goes on to demonstrate that abundance so remarkably that everyone is satisfied.

This event is one of Jesus' most vivid illustrations of the Good News that he preaches throughout his ministry: the Good News that the things we need—food, shelter, love, acceptance, fulfillment—are abundantly present.

This is a message that we long for, but that is difficult for us to grasp, because we live in a culture that assumes not abundance but scarcity. Our culture teaches that the necessities of life are in short supply, and that we have to compete vigorously, even go to war, to survive. Despite being the wealthiest nation on earth, we jealously guard our possessions from the needy ones of the world, sure that there isn't enough to go around. Because we assume that talent is scarce, we teach our children to compete for grades or acclaim on the athletic field. And because we believe there is not enough love, esteem and affirmation to go around, we compete for affection and regard with those around us, and feel depressed when we judge that we are not getting our share.

Unfortunately, when we act on a scarcity assumption, we create real scarcity. When the United States, with 6% of the world's population, rapaciously uses up over 1/3 of the earth's resources, we create scarcity in the rest of the world. When we set up a competitive grading system, instead of encouraging students to work together creatively, we create a scarcity of students who believe in their own ability. When we compete for love and esteem, we create an atmosphere in which these feelings cannot survive.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to believe that the Good News of abundance was true? That there is enough compassion, enough wisdom, enough selflessness, that someday we might really live in a world at peace, a world of clean air and water in which all people were sustained, fulfilled and free? To help us believe, let us look at how Jesus' revealed God's kin-dom on earth one day by the Sea Galilee. Jesus and the disciples have just heard the horrifying news that King Herod has beheaded John the Baptist. Jesus has withdrawn to a deserted place to be alone with his grief. The disciples have followed him, hoping for some time as a community to digest this news and plan for the future. However, their time alone is not to be. A huge crowd has followed them, and Jesus, sensing the crowd's hunger for a teacher, has compassion on them and opens his heart to teach and heal.

At last evening comes, and the disciples have had more than enough of the crowd. They come to Jesus saying, "O.K., it's late now. It's time to send these people away. They must be hungry. Send them to the villages to buy something to eat." The disciples assume scarcity. The people have a need that cannot be met here, so it's time to resort to

the market economy. Each person is to go buy what they need. If some have no money, too bad, the problem is out of the disciples' hands.

This solution not only makes the people compete, through the cash economy, for supposedly scarce resources, but it also destroys community. With the people scattered throughout the countryside, there is no chance for the group to act together to creatively meet the need.

Jesus has a different solution. "They need not go away," he says, "*You* give them something to eat." The disciples aren't impressed. "There's nothing here but five loaves and two fish!" they report. "No way is this enough to feed all these people."

I am intrigued by what Jesus does next. He has the crowd sit down on the grass. This is the beginning of the miracle. Think of a standing crowd you have been in: everyone straining to see the speaker, jockeying for a place in the front, all facing in one direction, interacting with each other only to subtly or not-so-subtly push someone else aside in order to get a better view.

But then the crowd sits down, and a whole different set of interactions begins. People are relieved to rest, they smile at one another, move to make room. For the first time they notice friends and relatives around them, go over to sit with them, exchange a hug and a greeting. The faceless crowd begins to become a community.

Then Jesus looks up to heaven, and blesses and breaks the loaves and fish. Jesus knows that everything we have is a gift from God, and that it is God's strength that empowers us to do all that we do. He also knows that God counts on us to express God's love in the world, to make abundance real through our willingness to risk and to share. Jesus is willing to risk that the gift of all that he and the disciples have, five loaves and two fish, will result in a satisfied, rather than an angry crowd. How many of us would risk that much, have that much faith, make ourselves that vulnerable?

I wonder what happened next. Did the sight of that small band giving thanks and then offering all that they had to others, inspire the people to give all that *they* had, too? Was it being among friends and family that inspired them to share? They were filled, of course, with more than bread and fish, but with a whole afternoon of experiencing Jesus' compassion for them, hearing his teaching, experiencing his healing. In any case, we are told that all were satisfied, and that there was more than enough. The kin-dom was among them, abundantly.

So let us remember the lesson of this event: not that it was a magical multiplying of food, which we could not replicate, but that it was a far greater miracle. It was a miracle that happened in the context of community, with the acknowledgement that God is the source of all our gifts, by the modeling of selfless, compassionate, vulnerable generosity, and faith that the means to meet our needs are abundantly available among us.

Is this a miracle that we can replicate? Indeed it is. We replicate it every day in this community: by raising money this month for Elizabeth Gregory Home, so that it will be able to pay its September rent across the street; by sharing our space with homeless teens through the Sanctuary Art Center; by serving meals at the ROOTS shelter and Central Lutheran; by offering our kitchen and Fellowship Hall to Teen Feed every Monday and to Blessed Sacrament Church every Sunday—this very day Blessed Sacrament will serve a nutritious meal to between 4 and 5 hundred hungry people in our Fellowship Hall.

We know about the miracles of God's abundance: we participate in them. But how would our lives change if we truly believed, with every inch of our being, that God loved us and provided for us, all of us, abundantly?

Wouldn't it mean that we would give away far more of what we have, trusting that what we need will come, and that if it doesn't, we probably didn't need as much as we thought we did, anyway?

Wouldn't putting our trust in God's love mean that we would give up our vain attempts to protect ourselves from pain and suffering, and instead enter fully into life, in all its pain and joy?

Wouldn't giving our allegiance to Jesus mean accepting Jesus' challenge to follow him, even if it meant taking up the cross?

And wouldn't believing in God's abundant love mean that we would spend far less time worrying about getting the love and approval of other people, and much more time loving others?

I close with a Sufi Muslim tale about a man who was walking through the forest when he saw a fox that had lost its legs and wondered how it lived. Then he saw a tiger come in with game in its mouth. The tiger had its fill and left the rest of the meat for the fox.

The next day God fed the fox by means of the same tiger. The man began to wonder at God's greatness and said to himself, "I too shall just rest in a corner with full trust in God, and God will provide me with all I need."

He did this for many days but nothing happened, and he was almost at death's door when he heard a voice say, "O you who are in the path of error, open your eyes to the truth! Follow the example of the tiger and stop imitating the legless fox." [Felman and Kornfield, eds., *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 66]

May we all be tigers, sharing God's abundance with joyful and trusting hearts.  
Amen.