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Matthew 14:13-21

“The Legacy We Leave: How We Spend Our Time”

Last week I began a new series titled “The Legacy We Leave”, and I talked about the importance of the values we leave to others. Not the valuables we leave but the values; and how the legacy of the values we leave endures more generations than the valuables we leave.

Today we’re looking at how we spend our time. What do we do with our days? It’s a cliché to say every day is a gift from God. But every day is a gift from God! So what do you want to do with the time you’re given? What is the legacy you’re leaving with how you spend your time?

Now before I begin I want to say that this is not a sermon meant to make anyone feel badly about how they spend their time. I’m guessing I’m not the only one here who spends too much time on my phone playing games or scrolling social media, or binge watching my latest show. Frankly, sometimes that’s about all the bandwidth I can manage after a long day. And that’s OK.

What I want us to do is to thoughtfully consider how we’re spending our time – what we’re doing with our time – and if those minutes, hours and days are creating the legacy we wish to leave. Because how we spend our time makes an impact for good, bad, or indifference. What you want to be known for impacts how you spend your time. To get us thinking about this, you’ll hear the beloved story about the feeding of the 5000. And so I invite you to listen for the word of God as it comes to you today.

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. **This is the Word of the Lord.**

Ever gracious and loving God, you provide so much for us. And yet, there are many times we still feel it's not enough. Help us to see that what you give is more than enough to satisfy our needs. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

A theology professor once remarked to a class full of students that, "Nobody is an unbeliever. The question is what you believe."

There are no unbelievers. The more I thought about that, the more I agreed. Everyone believes something. But what is it that I believe, and what is it that you believe?

Years ago there was a show on NPR called "This I Believe." Everyone from Bill Gates and Gloria Steinem to a retired teacher took a stab at writing a two or three minute essay telling people what they believe.

What would you write about? What basic tenet is so important to you that you would share it on national radio?

The early church used the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 to tell the world what it believed, and – trivia fact -- it's the only miracle that is told in all four gospels. Which tells us that this is a very important story about what we should believe.

The story opens with Jesus withdrawing to a deserted place because he has just heard the news that his cousin John, the one who baptized him in the Jordan and mentored him has been beheaded.

John's followers bury him and go find Jesus to tell him what happened, that John has been beheaded because of a greedy daughter, a jealous wife, and a cowardly king. It's brutal, appalling, and terrifying. The news about John no doubt stunned Jesus and broke his heart. John was family, a childhood playmate, and teenage companion. They shared a deep faith and fierce commitment to their people. And now, he's gone.

Matthew reports, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself." Of course he did. That's what you do when you receive devastating news. And in addition to his grief, there was surely a new sense of his own vulnerability. After all, this is what happens when you offend real power.

The crowds, too, have heard the news of John's murder. So they follow Jesus, perhaps looking for comfort or the assurance that everything will be alright. But the disciples want to respect Jesus' privacy, so they say "Send them away, Jesus. It's time to take care of yourself. If anyone ever needed to be left alone for a while, it's you. Besides, it's late in the day. They're all hungry. They need food. We'll tell the crowds to go away, go into town and buy some food and come back in the morning."

But Jesus, heartbroken, has compassion. "They need not go away," he says. "You give them something to eat."

Barbara Brown Taylor says she wishes she was there to hear that, to see how they looked at each other when he said that. “What do you mean we should give them something to eat? All we have between us is five loaves of bread and two salted fish, which is hardly a snack for twelve men, never mind five thousand. There are five thousand people out there, Jesus – plus women and children. No disrespect intended, but you are not making sense” (The Seeds of Heaven, p.50).

They were operating out of a sense of scarcity, Barbara says. They looked at the crowd, assessed the need and their own meager resources, and came to the very sensible conclusion that there is not enough.

Now friends, I want to pause here and give you a moment to consider how you would respond if you were in the disciples’ shoes. Your response says something about what you believe and thus, how you spend your time.

Frequently, and unfortunately, we respond like the disciples did. We balk and protest about limited resources and abilities. Ironically, churches are especially good at this. Have you ever noticed there’s never enough time, money, or people? No matter what the size of the church! I have yet to meet a church that says “We have plenty to go around!” Even though they do! Even though you do. The world has sold us scarcity and we have bought it hook, line and sinker. We define ourselves by what we lack rather than what we have. We don’t have the time, we don’t have the resources, we don’t have the money, we don’t have the people! I’ve sat in on those committee meetings, and you have, too.

And we do this on a personal level, too. I don’t have the time, I don’t have the resources, I don’t have the money, I don’t have the skills. We concentrate more on what we lack rather than what we have. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that,” we say. Because I don’t have the skill/talent/knowledge/expertise . . . you fill in the blank.

And yet . . . and yet . . . we believe in a God of abundance. At least we say we do.

In one of my very first sermons with you, I told you about an improv exercise called “yes, and”. Do you remember that? If you weren’t here or need a refresher, “yes, and” is an improv technique that allows for anything to happen, and it goes like this: No matter what your fellow actors present to you, instead of negating it, belittling it, or disagreeing with it, your job is to say, “Yes, and...” Accept the scenario as it’s presented to you (regardless of where you wanted it to go), and then add to it. For example, if the actor says, “We’re going to go to Paris on vacation,” you would respond with, “Yes, and we’re going to up in the Eiffel Tower!” “Yes, and” gets the creative juices flowing and keeps possibilities open, as compared to if someone responded, “No, not Paris! I want to go to London.” Saying no shuts down the conversation, or leads to a debate about the merits of going to Paris instead of London.

Engaging in the “yes, and” improv technique, when I’ve done it before, has made me realize how often I say “no” to something. And most of us say “No” a lot. We have to. Our energy is limited. Our time is limited. Our resources are limited. So in order to get things done, we have to be choosy about how best to utilize our time and our resources.

But on the other hand, we can’t let “no”, or what we lack, define who we are or what we’re going to do, that should not be our legacy -- either personally or as a church. Our model for ministry should be “yes, and”, not “yes, but . . .” because we believe in a God of abundance, not scarcity. We believe in a God who looks at our 5 loaves and 2 fish, blesses them, and then hands them back to us and says, “Here you go. This is all you need.”

That’s right, it’s a subtle but important point in our story: Jesus doesn’t feed the people, the disciples do. God takes what we give to God, blesses whatever it is, no matter how inadequate we think it is, and promptly turns around and gives it right back to us so we can bless others. So that can be our legacy. God transforms our small portions and feelings of inadequacy into a meal fit for a crowd.

You want to know the real miracle of the story? Spoiler alert, it’s not the feeding of the 5000. The miracle is that Jesus encouraged the disciples to get away from

their small thinking and to instead consider that what they had was more than enough. I have said it before, but I will say it again, that God has given you everything you need to be in ministry right here, right now, in this location at this time. You have everything you need to feed a crowd. Look at you! We have every gift and skill we need right here to do what God is calling us to do – which is to feed people – spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally.

Friends, I understand that it's easy to feel like what we bring to the table isn't enough. Sometimes this is because of humility, sometimes it's because we're tired, and sometimes it's feelings of inadequacy. And sometimes we do lack skills or time. For example, I know that I don't have the time to chair a committee of the HHS Marching Band. Nor do I have the desire, to be honest. But, I do have the ability and can carve out an hour to serve pizza before a football game, or chop vegetables for Johnny Appleseed. And you know what? That's important! As someone who does lead plenty of stuff, I can tell you firsthand that worker bees are vital to getting stuff done. Plus, it's the involvement of the community that helps in part to make the band what it is and create the legacy it has. And, I want my kids to see that volunteering and helping one's community is important; that's part of the legacy I hope to leave them.

God has given us countless gifts that need to be shared. Consider the gifts and abilities that you have. Maybe you're really organized and good with numbers, or you love to paint or draw. Perhaps you're particularly handy and love working with your hands, or you have the ability to quickly get to know people and develop relationships. Maybe you find it easy to talk about your faith and pray with others, or you have a knack for writing and communicating in creative ways. Whatever it is, find ways to share them, in this community and beyond. Don't just leave the work to others that might be "more" qualified than you. Trust them to Jesus in a spirit of prayer, and see if just maybe he might be calling YOU to use them to be a part of what God is doing in the world. What a wonderful legacy you would leave by doing that.

And one last thought. Consider what would have happened if the disciples had not shared their bread and fish. Do you know how foul fish smells if it isn't used? It stinks and it ends up wasted in the trash. The same is true of the gifts we have if we just tuck them away in a box, never to see the light of day. And I don't know about you, but I'd rather have baskets of leftovers than stinky fish and moldy bread. I do not want that to be my legacy. I'm guessing you don't want that to be your legacy, either. Or for that matter, the church's.

Friends, God has given us more gifts and skills and abilities than we realize. Where we see two fish and five loaves of bread, God sees a meal fit for a crowd. God sees something bigger, and God can do big things with even the smallest gifts. What a wonderful legacy you, me, we would leave if we recognize that and share our gifts and skills and abilities with God, with each other, and with the world.

Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Elizabeth Lovell Milford, August 6, 2017, "What's in Your Lunchbox?"

Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 2, commentary on Matthew 14:13-21

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, commentary on Matthew 14:13-21