

Sunday Service at 10:30 AM
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“Cultivating a Culture of Generosity”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 2, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 55: 1-5 Matthew 14: 13-21

Isaiah 55: 1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

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.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.”

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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

The Miracle of God's Generosity...and Our Own

Not too long ago the Rev. Betty Brewer-Calvert called 10,000 Villages.
She did not call ten thousand villages,
 even though she has unlimited minutes on her cell phone.
She called a local store named 10,000 Villages,
 a shop once located nearby in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood.
The store stocked fair-trade food and handmade items
 from farms, towns, and collectives from around the world.
Betty called because our church was hosting an Advent workshop.
We envisioned including alternative gift ideas as well as worship resources for each home.
Betty asked the store manager about participating by creating a display of fair-trade items.
She interrupted Betty.

"Did you say First Christian Church of Decatur?"

I know your church!

I vote there at election time because you are my polling place.

I could see from your bulletin boards how involved you are in the community.

I've heard of good things you do for the city.

I'd be delighted to make a display for your Advent workshop.

You know, we have coffees and chocolate, Christmas ornaments and small gifts.

We can even create a consignment shop there at your church if you want."

"...if you want."

She probably meant was *I want*

I want to get on board.

I want to support the good works you offer in God's name.

When we are generous of spirit and energy,

 sharing above and beyond all that we have and are, people notice.

People are grateful.

People want to get on board.

People will spread the news.

People noticed when Jesus shared his spirit of generosity and grace,

 going above and beyond the norm to embody and emulate love.

The Gospel writers sure noticed.

All four Gospels include the miracle story of Jesus feeding multitudes with just a little,
 with a few fish and some loaves of bread.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John point to this miracle
 as evidence of God's generosity in community.

We -- folks from all walks of life -- gather together
 in this sacred space and safe place to contemplate

the miracle of God's generosity and our own.
Explore the miracle of generosity in the context of the human condition.
In the human condition

there is brokenness and fragmentation and tribalism,
and there are amazing, blessed, heroic acts
of healing and hospitality and hope.

Today's scripture from Matthew 14

- the story of the feeding of 5,000 with 5 fish and two loaves --
follows immediately after an act of horrific violence against the innocent.

Also in Matthew 14,

Jesus of Nazareth learned that his first cousin John the Baptist
had been murdered by order of King Herod.

Jesus responded like you and I might have responded.

He wanted to be alone.

Wouldn't you?

Alone with his tears and grief and memories,
alone with his righteous anger at injustice--again!
alone with his fear for his own life--again!
alone with God--again!

The Bible says that Jesus withdrew "*to a deserted place by himself.*"

We imagine He withdrew to pray, to recite psalms, to seethe,
to let go, let God, let himself collect his thoughts.

*"But when the crowds heard it,
they followed him on foot from the towns."* (Matt. 14: 14)

Some folks may have gone out to comfort Jesus in His grief and loss,
to sit Shiva with Him.

Some may have carried out to the Son of God
their hurt and hurting in need of help and healing.

Some may have reached out for a hope-filled Word
in the aftermath of senseless violence and murder.

All sought to deepen their relationships with God and one another.

*"When Jesus went ashore, he saw [the] great crowd;
and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."* (Matt. 14: 15)

The next words in the Bible are, "*When it was evening...*"

Are you serious?

When it was...evening?

The Gospel tells us that Jesus wanted to be alone, but then a multitude found Him.
He saw before Him the needs of God's people, and our own as well.

He had compassion on them, on us.
He tends to their wounds, our wounds, and it takes all day.

Before we move any further in the passages before us,
rushing head long from the healing to the feeding,
the feeding of 5,000 men plus women and children
with only a few fish and loaves of bread,
let's set right here for a sec and ponder.

When it was evening, Jesus paused from a full day of healing His people.

Healing takes time.

Curing requires compassionate effort and expertise, prayer and patience, trust and time.
The reality is: there are no quick fixes.
The Good News is there are fixes.
There are cures and healings, restorations and reconciliations.
Recognize that healing may take a while, even until the moon rises on the horizon.

Healing takes being open to God's will.

Are you like me, on that long line of folks
who inform God what I want or expect or think I need,
only to be amazed, grateful, blessed
to realize that healing may be otherwise,
something unexpected, cosmic, transformative.
We may be looking for what we hope for,
lifting to God our pleas and prayers for something specific,
only to discover instead, by the grace of God,
a different healing that is relational or emotional,
physical or spiritual.

One lovely Sunday morning we testified in worship about God's power to heal.
Afterward a church member coping bravely with ALS said
– Becky Kidd has given me permission to share this conversation –
Becky Kidd said, *"Thanks to the grace of God,
there is healing even if there is no cure."*

She's an angel, now.
There is healing even if there is no cure.
Becky's body and soul discovered that, thanks be to God,
we live in a resurrection-drenched world.

Healing takes a community.

Healing requires a village, maybe even 10,000 villages,
acting in concert, with compassion and purpose.

A student asked anthropologist Margaret Mead
about the earliest sign of civilization in a culture.
The student expected Margaret Mead's answer to be that
the artifact which points to the first known civilization was a clay pot,
or maybe a grinding stone.
Margaret Mead said, "*A healed femur.*"
Mead then explained that no mended bones are found
wherever the law of the jungle reigned,
where survival of the fittest was the only way to live.
A healed femur showed that someone, somewhere, somehow cared.
Margaret Mead's point is that once upon a time
the world changed from animal, instinctual existence
to humane caring and communal living.
The first mark of civilization, of community, of generosity of spirit is mercy.
The human context has evolved from aloneness and selfishness
to community living and generosity of spirit.
You see, the person with a broken leg was dependent.
Until that broken femur healed,
other souls had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering,
bring food and water, keep him or her near the fire, protect from danger.
Signs of compassion are signs of human civilization.
We often remind one another in this faith community:
"Be kind; you do not know the burdens people carry."

Healing takes time, takes a community & takes generosity of spirit.

My father, the late Rev. George E. Calvert,
loved to tell the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus women and children
with only a few fish and loaves.
George received it as a divine metaphor for life in community.
George believed the folks present had morsels of food in their own bags or purses,
yet were hesitant to share out of fear of scarcity.
He imagined the expressions of people in the crowd
watching as a child donated all he had,
giving five loaves and two fish to Jesus to be blessed and shared.
Folks in the crowd then shared their hidden lunches with each other.
Regardless of whether they did so out of shame, relief or genuine generosity,
George gave thanks that everyone contributed out of what they had.
The results were evident:
filled bellies, satisfied souls, and overflowing baskets of leftovers.

You have witnessed this same miracle many, many times.

What happens when you are in a group and someone starts to share?

People start to pitch in.

A dollar here, a helping hand there,
a barn raising over yonder, a conversation that matters in the sanctuary,
a painting party with lots of pizza and laughter,
annual celebrations of our Chalice Thrift store,
a feeding of families at Hagar's House shelter
and the Free Food Pantry by the sidewalk,
a collecting of supplies for families in Puerto Rico
and across DeKalb County.

When we are generous of spirit and energy,
sharing above and beyond all that we have and are, people notice.

People are grateful.

People want to get on board.

People will spread the Good News.

And the Good News of God's Big Love is cosmic.

Unconditional love and giving cultivate generous communities.

Dr. Anthony Campolo is a speaker, author, sociologist, pastor, social activist
and passionate follower of Jesus.

He is a Pentecostal Christian who discerned recently in his long career
that there is no place for homophobia in the church or in society.

Tony Campolo came out in favor of gay marriage, equal rights,
and the ordination of homosexuals.

For his public stand for the disinherited,

Campolo was shunned by many of his lifelong friends.

And then guess what happened...

he discovered that there are many, many more of people like you and me
who celebrate that when God says to love and affirm all people,
all means all.

Tony Campolo tells a story about being invited to speak at a meeting of 300 women.

The president of the women's organization read aloud a letter from a missionary.

In the moving letter, the missionary expressed a dire need of \$4,000
to take care of an emergency that had cropped up.

The president then said, *"We need to pray that God will provide the resources
to meet the need of this missionary.*

Brother Campolo, will you please pray for us?"

Tony Campolo said, *"No."*

"I beg your pardon," she said.

*"No," said Campolo, "I won't pray for that.
I believe that God has already provided the resources,
and that all we need to do is give.
Tell you what I'm going to do.
I'm going to step up to this table
and [place upon it] every bit of cash I have in my pocket.
If all of you will do the same thing,
I think God has already provided the resources."*

The president of the organization chuckled a little bit, and said,
*"Well, I guess we get the point.
Brother Campolo is trying to teach us that we all need to give sacrificially."*

*"No, that is not what I am trying to teach."
Campolo said, "I'm teaching that God has already provided for this missionary.
All we need to do is give it.
Here, I'm going to put down all of my money I have with me."*

He placed \$15 on the table, then looked at the president.
She opened her purse and took out all her cash, which was around \$40,
and put it on the table.

One by one the 299 remaining women got up and put cash on the table.
When the money was counted, they had oversubscribed the \$4,000 needed.

Tony Campolo said, *"Now, here [before us is] the lesson.
God always supplies for our needs, and [God] supplied for this missionary, too.
The only problem was we were keeping it for ourselves.
Now let's pray, [giving thanks for God's] provision."*

Today, right here, right now,
God is providing 10,000 villages of people called churches,
churches to heal, to love, to serve,
to build the Beloved Community.

Margaret Mead pointed out that
not only do small groups change the world,
it is the only way it ever has.

Never underestimate the power of a small group of people
committed to healing and feeding the world, body and soul.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!