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Isaiah 55 1-5, Matthew 14:13-21 Year A 10th Sunday after Pentecost
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“Take Home the Leftovers”
Preached at Kailua Christian Church

Scripture Reference - Isaiah 55:1-5 & Matthew 14:13-21 - The Message Translation

Isaiah 55:1-5 Buy Without Money

“Hey there! All who are thirsty, come to the water! Are you penniless? Come anyway—buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money—everything’s free! Why do you spend your money on junk food, your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best, fill yourself with only the finest. Pay attention, come close now, listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words. I’m making a lasting covenant commitment with you, the same that I made with David: sure, solid, enduring love. I set him up as a witness to the nations, made him a prince and leader of the nations, And now I’m doing it to you: You’ll summon nations you’ve never heard of, and nations who’ve never heard of you will come running to you Because of me, your God, because The Holy of Israel has honored you.”

Matthew 14:13-21 Supper for Five Thousand

¹³⁻¹⁴ When Jesus got the news, he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself. But unsuccessfully—someone saw him and the word got around. Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was. When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick.

¹⁵ Toward evening the disciples approached him. “We’re out in the country and it’s getting late. Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper.”

¹⁶ But Jesus said, “There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper.”

¹⁷ “All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish,” they said.

¹⁸⁻²¹ Jesus said, “Bring them here.” Then he had the people sit on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the congregation. They all ate their fill. They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. About five thousand were fed.

MESSAGE

I’m always a fan of passages that connect faith to food. And this is not only because we connect around a table of welcome as the central ritual for our worship as Christians. For when we eat food we find the meeting of nourishment and pleasure,

and when we add in God,
we encounter the mystery of God who sustains and God who delights.

Thinking of the gospel passage as a miracle because five thousand were fed from meager resources is certainly not the point of today's Gospel passage,
If there is a number to focus on, it is not the five loaves,
The two fishes
The five thousand that were fed
No, if there is a number here in the story to build into a lesson, it is the twelve,
Not the twelve apostles who doubtless earned their keep running baskets of food that day to feed so many in one sitting,
But the twelve baskets of food, LEFT OVER.
To drive home the point, the story is repeated in the next chapter of Matthew with a similar feeding,
but with different numbers of loaves, fish and people, but the result is the same;
Everyone's hunger is satiated and there is still food to spare.
The story paints us a picture of God's abundance in provision,
To satisfy hunger in a moment of desperate need.

But even here, the image of God's abundance is not a place to rest with easy comfort.
We know that appeals to God's ability to fix all our problems in the end have historically been used to justify limitless personal greed.
If God is infinite, knowing no bounds or limits, this fallacy states,
Then why can't I take all the clean water that I want?
What of pollution, or climate change based hunger?
Poverty
Isn't God big enough to fix all of our problems?
And didn't God give creation over to us for our dominion?

But to build faith in God's abundance is not carte blanche to lust after all of the power and wealth that will not fill the hunger that is in our hearts, or our pocketbooks or our bellies.
Yes, perhaps the crowds here acted foolishly,
They went off into the wilderness,
a setting that signaled a place of danger or testing to the original Jewish audience for the gospel of Matthew.
And here they willingly ventured into wilderness, without basic provisions!
But the crowds were seeking to be with Jesus,
to hear him, to touch him to see him, to be with him.
This is what later drove them to a desperate place of physical hunger,
a hunger for encounter with their healer and teacher.

The focus of the story on relationship with Jesus and not food is made even more clear when we remember Jesus's earlier declaration after forty days of fasting in

the wilderness,

When he is asked by the Tempter at his moment of greatest physical need,
“Why not command stones to become bread, since you are the Son of God, and your will is by nature, just.”

His response,

that we thrive not on bread, but on the word of life from God,

makes clear what sorts of needs Jesus is here to meet at the side of the lake here in today’s story.

Furthermore, the reason that we’ve even found ourselves in this desperate situation,

far from home and the familiar,

is that Jesus has fled those who are his flock to find a quiet place to reflect on mortality,

both theirs, and quite possibly his own,

and to grieve the death of his cousin John the Baptist.

And so, it is very much on Jesus’ mind that bread alone cannot save these people.

But as the crowds gather in anticipation of his shore fall,

Jesus is overcome with pity at the frailty of our mortality.

He begins to heal bodies.

And this goes on for so long, that the people lose track of time,

they lose track of their hungry children and the needs of their own bodies,

and Jesus keeps on going,

only stopping when his disciples threaten him with dismissing the crowds.

But Jesus chooses to keep the crowds close to him,

and feeds them that they may not have to return so quickly to the villages.

And so perhaps it is NOT the case, as has been told in past commentaries,

that this story is a lesson solely about mercy,

that the crowds were delivered from the natural consequences of their shortsightedness,

not having packed a picnic basket for their romp in the wilderness.

Instead, we see a story of the people’s surprise for what they could not foresee,

that Jesus would share lavishly of himself,

far beyond the limits that the next mealtime could have ever prepared them to ask for.

But here again, the abundance of leftover bread points to Jesus’ abundance of pity for us,

which took priority over his own grief,

and motivated his abundance of healing miracles,

and his compassion in the feeding of the crowds,

which enabled even more healing to continue.

When we speak of God's abundance,
this story presents us with a few points of interest:
The first is that abundance is not a resource,
to be mined, betted against, or traded as futures.
The crowds sought merely to be close to Jesus,
they were not responding to a promise of miracles to come,
and there was no entitlement in their expectation for feeding.

Furthermore, there was no sense of a transactional merit for Jesus' actions.
It is simply Jesus' nature,
the truest expression of his being,
to be moved by pity for us;
Just as much as it is simply an expression of our nature,
to need feeding.

While Jesus was moved by compassion to perform acts of healing,
when it came to hunger, there was,
to quote the Message translation,
simply, "no need" for them to be dismissed.

Here the gospel makes clear that it is as incorrect to say that our shortcoming
provoked a fundamental aspect of the character of God,
as it is to say that the hunger of the crowds moved Jesus to act.
There was simply no need for them to disperse.
The crowds were being human, and Jesus was being Jesus.
When we begin to imagine God's abundance as being motivated by our finitude
and reliance,
we begin a journey that leads perilously close to idolatry,
shaping God by the image of our own need.
The second observation is that God's abundance blesses the whole crowd gathered.
Here the number of so many in the crowd is significant not because it glorifies
Jesus, Here each member of the crowd benefits equally,
defining a whole community that has been blessed out of God's abundance.

We are reminded here about the other great feeding story in the biblical tradition,
the Manna that came down from heaven to feed the Hebrew people as a sign of
God's faithfulness despite their grumbling and their wandering, in yet another
wilderness.

We remember that those who tried to store up manna,
hoarding more than the share that was necessary for one day's worth of sustenance
were frustrated in their greed and attempt at domination
when they found that their food had turned to worms the next day.

When we take these two observations together,

we see that God's abundance fundamentally challenges the way of thinking that looks to God as a parachute,
left to clean up after our messes,

Instead we see a story of surprise at generosity,
not one of reliance or expectation.

And we also see that the infinity of God's abundance is not an open invitation to those for whom more is never enough,
Instead, in the context of abundance as a core element of the nature of God,
we see that abundance renders greed meaningless.

To these first two points, I would like to add a third.
Though God's abundance is not shaped as a response to our need,
it is most easily recognized in this way.

Besides those who might abuse God's abundance, looking at God for self-benefit, asking "what can God do for me?"
the other sort of response which misses the point is one that seeks to feed oneself, to be so self-sufficient, and self-reliant,
as to never be found in a position of hunger or absolute inability to care for oneself. Those sorts would have left when their tummies started to growl or sought out a town on their own before the disciples had even stepped in to ask Jesus for an adjournment.
and they would have thoroughly missed out on the blessing.

Ivan Illich, a catholic priest living in Mexico,
Who used to trained potential missionaries to Latin America from the United States and Canada,
once wrote in his manifesto "Tools for Conviviality",
that the gesture that best defines humans is a welcoming reception. 1

His conclusion was partly based on a reaction to the attitude that reconceived of the finitude of life as a challenge.

He noted that there is a cost when we only approach limits as a challenge for our ingenuity,
an opportunity to overcome boundaries and earn praise for having done so,
the cost is that our zeal negates the ability to receive or appreciate hospitality.

Because it is as true today as it was it was for the hungry crowds surrounding Jesus,
That the limits of our ability to control the circumstances of our lives creates the need to accept assistance and welcome from others.
Limits, Illich would say, form the threshold between shelter and storm,
The space for the possibility of receiving hospitality.

Illich's critique sheds light on the way that Jesus actions in this story mimic the role of hospitality:

welcoming, feeding, fellowship and service,
precisely because of the crowds were incapable of feeding themselves

1 (Illich, Tools for Conviviality, 1973, p. xi)

Our ability to experience God's abundance is impeded by the ways that we strive to fix all of our challenges for ourselves,
Or worse yet, assume that it is our individual responsibility to take care of all of our own problems.

The phrase it is more blessed to give to receive is meant to speak of the merits of generosity,
but it can be perverted into something very dark when it is taken to mean that there is something shameful about needing to receive assistance, hospitality from one another.

However, it is never too late to release our grip on pretending that we can take care of all of our own needs.

As Christians, we'll only have the type of polite,
skim milk community typical of after church coffee hour pleasantries?

How are you? Oh fine!

if we don't learn to talk about our needs,

and trust that the church,

our community,

won't judge us for being honest about all the ways we don't feel like we're making it,

when we trust that God meets our needs with abundance

that is when we find the abundance to bless each other as a church community,

as we all receive together from God's abundance.

And let's not forget the passage from Isaiah

Isaiah calls out as one inviting crowds to a great feast.

"Come, buy and eat-everything's for free!"-

to remind the Hebrew people that they had not been abandoned by God.

This open invitation to a feast,

a metaphor for YHWH's hospitality and abundance,

is addressed directly to a people who are desperate.

People that are having their own wilderness experience while being exiled in Babylon.

But this invitation does not come without a challenge.

The people are examined in verse 2

"Why spend your money for that which does not satisfy? Junk food? Cotton Candy?"

Are God's gifts, God's promises, only temporary, merely snacks that leave us more hungry than we started?

What is better than food,
the prophet reminds the people,
is their everlasting identity as chosen by God.

The pressures of assimilation into this foreign land tempt the people to forsake not only the blessing of YHWH's covenant with David,
but also, the role that YHWH has yet in store for Israel to be the focal point for the outpouring of God's abundance to the nations.

Just as Isaiah calls out to Israel at the beginning of this chapter to come, eat freely!
so too will Israel be an invitation for Nations to come and to feast richly,
basking in the abundant hospitality of the life-giving, solid, enduring love of YHWH.

This is a statement of the fourth and final observation about the Abundance of God.

That which sustains us,
the Word of God,
is not a gift for our benefit alone.

This gift of life is not meant to be fully realized in its being received,
in the ways it nourishes our own bodies and animates our lives.

Instead, it is enjoyed as abundance truly when it pours out of ourselves and blesses others,
even as far as the Nations of the earth.

Thus, we must further refine the question of what will satisfy us.
What satisfies is not determined by our individual, personal need.
The question that Isaiah asks in its fullest meaning is
"What is it, that will satisfy ALL of us?"

This is a question that puts abundance squarely in conversation with what is sustainable,
in order that all might flourish,
and that God's abundance must be made accessible to all,
even those who have a different nationality, living amongst us, regardless of immigrant status
even those who look differently, vote differently, love differently than we do,
even the most vulnerable elements of creation.

It is too easy to kick the can of hope down the road,
That the life of abundance for all is a promise only realized in heaven,

Or in the end times, or at some vague point in the future that we aren't responsible for NOW.

Our Christian lives calls us to achieve a vision that is as old as the Christian religion,
that the glory of God is visible when all creation is fully alive.
in the here and now.

Sally McFague, a theologian who often writes about the environment encourages us with an image that connects abundance back to mealtime around a table.
At God's table of abundance,
she wrote, there is enough space for all,
if we are only willing to take a little less for ourselves.

Abundance, as a way of living obliges us to be mindful not only of our own needs, but also, what is nourishing and life giving to our neighbor, our environment, and even those we feel very little connection to.

If abundance is an aspect of the character of God,
it is an aspect of the way we relate to each other in this church community and to the outside world as a church within a larger community.
The feeding of the crowds was Jesus modeling this behavior, sustaining bodies so that they as a gathered community could both receive a blessing,
as well as be a blessing as they dispersed home and told of Jesus' healing and teachings.
As we go out into the world,
our task is realized in both the competing needs of sharing abundance, and in acknowledging our own limits and needs.

Though they might seem to contradict,
in fact one cannot happen without the other.
In our need, we receive the gift of life,
and in our receiving we are empowered to share with others.
Here the work mirrors both the content and the character of God's abundance.
Amen.