

July 31, 2011      “Invisible Abundance”      Matt 14:13-21      Seaside CCUCC

Years ago, when I moved from a position as an associate pastor in a congregation into transitional ministry, a fairly new and somewhat unknown ministry, it stirred lots of questions. My first interim ministry ended with a church closing after 2 years. Not an easy ministry. During the following years, many people—most often my clergy colleagues—would ask me, “So when are you going to get your own church?- a real ministry?” Though I feel called to this specialized ministry, I realized that some folks thought I was not really doing ministry. The question has often tested my patience, but I have come to realize that when asked, it offers me an opportunity to educate people about the importance of Transitional Ministry for the future of the church. I answer with great energy, “ I am answering God’s call to ministry in a time of change. What I do is real ministry.

Fourteen years since moving into the form of ministry to which I feel most called, I don’t get this question so often, but I continue to be aware of how many still think that “real” ministry is only that which is a permanent call to pastor of a church. In some cases, retired clergy have accepted requests to serve a church during a change in leadership to supplement their pensions; even if they have not studied Interim Ministry. Often congregations put their faith journey on hold, waiting for the “real” minister to arrive.

Because of lingering prejudices about transitional ministry, even though it has become a highly respected position, I still find myself fielding questions about what it is that I do, and why I do it, and just how it is a real ministry? I'm glad to have these conversations; especially in this time of discernment for so many churches asking, "Who are we? "What is the church is really about?" For so long, church just happened. People showed up. Children were plenty. And the budget was no problem. Ministers came and went without any thought to the transition time. In the last 20 years, it has been observed and experienced that a time of intentional study has served churches well.

While studying this Sunday's gospel from Matthew, I have recognized the determination and importance that is in interim ministry. I have also thought about the wideness and persistence of Jesus' ministry and the response of the disciples to his command to "feed the people". Jesus, has just heard about the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, at a feast of a most horrific event. He withdraws to a deserted place by himself. The crowds find him, however, and flock to him. He cures the sick among them. When the disciples remind Jesus that the hour is growing late, and that they are in a lonely, remote spot with no concession stands at hand, and that he needs to send the people into the villages to buy food, Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people themselves. By the time Jesus and the disciples leave this remote place, a miracle of feeding has occurred, with twelve baskets left over from what began as two fish and five loaves of bread. The story does not tell

us how the hungry crowd is fed in the wilderness; only that no one leaves hungry. And so the story invites us to use our imaginations. Conceivably the most profound thing Jesus does in the story is to insist that the disciples imagine possibilities for distributing food for a hungry crowd so that there is enough for everyone.

What transpired then is the only miracle included in all four gospels, the Feeding of the Five Thousand; plus women & children. (This point is another sermon.) Perhaps like most of us, I'm accustomed to often feeling that, like the disciples, I don't have what it takes to respond to a request of overwhelming magnitude. For all my caring, I am only one person. It's easy to hear this story and say to ourselves, "If only I could perform miracles! Then I could really make a difference in the world today." The fact is that we can perform miracles. Maybe we can't literally multiply loaves and fish, but we can definitely do what Jesus did: heal the sick and feed the hungry. Some people argue that people are poor because they're lazy, or because they choose to be poor, but no one chooses to miss a meal, much less starve to death. Yet millions of people around the world go to bed hungry every night. No one chooses to be sick, yet millions of people suffer from preventable or easily treatable diseases. Why? In both cases, because not enough people can imagine abundance.

The feeding of the multitudes, is a metaphorical example of the new world coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry

crowd, found and gave Jesus bread and fish, he *took, blessed, broke* and *gave* the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the sacramental, subversive reordering of public reality. By his actions & words he has offered the possibility to imagine abundance for all.

The theme of God's desire for abundant life for all resonates with the process notion that God is always luring the world toward the good, which is defined specifically as the welfare of all creatures, who are part of God's cosmic whole. The process understanding of the cooperative nature of the divine-human relationship requires our participation. It is God's initiating action—the divine encouragement of new possibilities of just relationships and orders of society—that is always the initiating action. We can cooperate with God in fostering just relationships in the world.

Similarly, the image of the disciples' faltering faith is something in which we all can relate. There are many times when we do in fact feel helpless in the face of gross injustices in society and the inflexibility of those in power with respect to environmental degradation. And yet the belief that God does in fact care about the world and is ever active in it can be an important source of empowerment if we

will accept the challenge – if we but, step out and imagine the possibilities that are achievable.

So it would seem that, if we stand in the shoes of the disciples in Matthew's account, we are to obey Jesus' daring, ridiculous command. We are to offer our limited resources to be blessed and multiplied, and take responsibility, not to hoard them for ourselves, but to distribute them to others. These resources could be money and possessions, but they can also include time, energy, innate abilities, and acquired skills. Offered and shared they can become a miracle of feeding for body and soul; for the giver, as well as the receiver.

Our current market ideology wants us to believe that life consists only of buying and selling, weighing, measuring and trading; for the sake of oneself. As we balance our national & state budgets on the backs of the vulnerable – the unemployed, the uninsured, the poor, the sick, the elderly, K-12 schools, child care, higher education are we asking that corporate taxes be fair and equitable, or for those who have benefited from this economic disaster to share in the wealth? And do we respond like the disciples, “Let them get their own.”

Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, one infused with the mystery of abundance & generosity. This abundance in the biblical sense is not gross

excessiveness. The twelve baskets of leftovers do not stand in for our tendency to accumulate and hoard; rather, they are a reminder that in God's economy there is always more than enough. And yet the "more" comes not from our own meager reserves (or from treasure stockpiled in fear or panic) but from God's endless supply of goodness and generosity. Our unimpressive resources, like the disciples's modest supply of bread and fish, become material abundance for those in "desert places": the uncomfortable & often ignored places.

A recent article in the Whittier Daily News tells about an alley in uptown that has become a homeless encampment and how the local merchants are upset and angry. There was no quote or comment from even one person concerned about the reality of these persons. And I ask, "Who would live in an alley, if one had a choice?" Yesterday, while walking through a parking lot, I watched as a women searched through a black plastic bag of clothes in her trunk; while two children waited in the back seat. The look in her eyes as we saw each other, told me what was going on in her life. How many live a paycheck away from homelessness? And there's the question of abundant gifts for the soul. What about our willingness to share a smile with a stranger or a kind word with a passing walker? How do we share our time & energy for the good of the other? When we make our resources available to the transforming power of a God who is always on the lookout for the vulnerable; when we are willing to share our stuff (our food, our money, our time, ourselves), then we participate in the creation of abundance and generosity.

I think of an insight from Fredrick Buechner, writer & theologian known for his ability to help his readers find grace in their lives: “Greed is the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The opposite of greed—the selfless love of God and neighbor—is based on the truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are.”

In the last several weeks I have had phone calls and comments that affirm the ministry I offer as an ordained minister in the UCC. I don’t quite know how to take it all in, this “invisible abundance” in the appearance of words of support. These persistent gifts have been like manna, multiplied bread offered to one sitting on a hillside in the desert, hungry. There has been so much of this living bread in the past weeks, at least twelve baskets full, that I imagine there is sustenance enough for the ministry ahead.

What are you hungry for these days? How are you being fed? How do you co-created with God, the abundance that is possible in a world so hungry for living bread?

May God meet your deepest hungers of body and soul with extravagance and grace. And may we know how to receive—and give—such feeding of invisible abundance. May it be so. Amen.