

"Generosity and Community"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 8, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: 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.

Generosity and Community

Earlier this week Betty Brewer-Calvert called 10,000 Villages.

She did not call ten thousand villages, even though she has unlimited minutes.

She called a local store named 10,000 Villages,

a shop located nearby in the Virginia Highlands neighborhood.

The store stocks Fair Trade food and handmade items

from farms, towns, and collectives from around the world.

Betty called because in November, our church is hosting an Advent workshop.

We want to include alternative gift ideas as well as worship resources for each home.

Betty was asking the manager about her store participating

by creating a display of Fair Trade items, when 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 would 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 really meant: *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.

We want to explore the miracle of generosity in the context of the human condition,

This week we're quite aware that in the human condition,
there is brokenness and fragmentation,
and there are amazing, blessed, heroic acts of healing and wholeness.

Today's Holy Scriptures from Matthew 14

follow immediately after an act of horrific violence against the innocent.

In Matthew 14, when Jesus of Nazareth learned that his first cousin John the Baptist

had been murdered by order of King Herod,
Jesus responded like any one of us would have.

He wanted to be alone.

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

So, Jesus withdrew "*to a deserted place by himself.*"

He withdrew to pray and recite the Psalms,
to let go, to let God, to let himself gather his thoughts.

"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." (Matt. 14: 14-15)

Some 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."

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.

I'm 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, surprising, otherworldly, transformational.

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 recent Sunday we spoke here about God's power to heal,

and 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."*

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 human context has evolved from loneliness and selfishness
to community living and generosity of spirit (knock on wood!).

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.

I am going to ask aloud some questions,

questions that have been heavy on my heart
in the wake of the tragedy of the mass murder and assault in Las Vegas.

They arose after prayerful contemplation

of what Jesus did after the slaying of his own cousin John the Baptist.

Even though Jesus was grieving a deep loss,

He welcomed His hurt and hurting people.

He had compassion for them, for us, for the whole people of God.

He then worked all day and into the evening to heal and bind up,

to listen and show He cared.

This week's shooting follows similar mass killings with weapons of mass destruction,

as easily accessible weapons were turned on human beings
in an Orlando nightclub, a Sandy Hook elementary school,
a South Carolina church in Bible Study,
Amish children in school, Columbine youth in classrooms,
and we could go on and on.

There is a lot of talk of fear of foreigners, of building walls and closing borders;

the reality is that the ones pulling triggers are our own.

The philosopher Pogo said, "*We have met the enemy, and he is us.*"

If we are the problem, then the solution lies within.

We are the ones God calls to address and solve this morass.

My prayerful questions are:

Should we as participants in God's beloved community

teach, preach, practice, and advocate alternatives to violence?

Should we make the time, invest the effort, risk the cost

to address American citizens' access to weapons of mass destruction?

Can we let go of the fear that Second Amendment rights will be lost,

a fear which hinders reasonable dialogue,
and deal directly with the matter at hand?

Can we do so without resorting to tired refrains or bumper sticker logic;

without resorting to name calling or disrespectful diatribes;
without resorting to deciding to dig in our heels lest we not get our way;
so may we do so with respect because whomever is across the table is us?

From what I have seen on social media,

these questions can only be addressed and discerned face-to-face
in a healing, helping environment.

We are the ones whom the victims' families are looking to and praying for mercy.

We the People are the people whom the world is waiting for to respond and act.

I would not raise such questions from this significant pulpit

if I did not have every confidence in the power and promise of Christ's Church
to work and play together for the common good.

I'll put it another way.

Whenever it comes to building community, the Church is called to speak and to act.

In community.

We are God's faith communities which practice a generosity of spirit and grace.

Face-to-face, in person, side by side.

It is far too easy to stare at a computer or phone screen and spout off rhetoric.

Much harder, and highly more effective, to do what Jesus did.

Live in community.

Love one another.

Seek the ways of peace, with mercy, with an eye toward justice.

Like Jesus, like the Wise Ones who have gone before us and are in our midst today,

let us make the time and energy to sit face to face, share our stories,
listen to the hurts, and seek to find true compromise & cooperation
that build up the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Generosity and Community

My father, the late Rev. George E. Calvert,

loved to tell the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus women and children.

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.

Regardless of whether the crowd then shared their hidden lunches

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?

Most often, 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,

a fifth-year celebration of our Chalice Thrift store,

a feeding of families at Hagar's House shelter,

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.

Today, right here, right now, God is providing 10,000 villages of people called churches

to heal, to love, to serve, to speak up and out for the sake of 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!