

“Stone soup, moving fences, and God’s time”

Mathew 14: 13-21

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Movement 1 We are hungry

A bewildering global economy takes our American jobs overseas and lengthens our unemployment lines. Among Americans who are still employed, the average household pays interest only on \$8400 of credit card debt. Because cannot pay off our credit card debt each month, we end up paying 112% of what things would cost if paid in cash. Over 40% of American households spend more than they make. Most of us live many miles from employment, and drive gas guzzlers to work. The cost of living is going up and our income is going down. We are the wealthiest nation in the world and we are broke. What difference can any president make in our economy? For that matter, what can even the God of all peoples and ages do about our mess? We are truly in a wilderness.

A tribe of Ancient Near Eastern former slaves consider themselves in an even worse predicament 3500 years ago. Their leaders just led them from captivity in Egypt, where they at least were well fed, into another wilderness called the Sinai desert. They are starving. They ask, “What can God do about this mess we are in?” *Exodus* 16 tells us they awaken the next morning to find some white stuff coating the ground all around them. They ask themselves, in Hebrew, “*Manna?*” That is, “What is it?” Moses said, “It is the bread God has given you to eat.”

2000 years ago, there is an episode that so impressed his followers, that it is Jesus’ only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. A story of a multitude of people facing an overburdening need, similar in some ways both to the current American economy, and to the story in *Exodus*. More than 5000 of them a day’s or more journey from home. And the disciples ask Jesus how they can possibly feed them all.

Movement 2 There is enough to go around

According to a tale told by the Grimms brothers, a soldier comes to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty pot. Upon his arrival, the villagers are unwilling to share any of their food with the hungry soldier. So the soldier fills his pot with water, drops a large stone in it, and places it over a fire in the middle of town square. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what he is doing. The soldier answers that he is making "stone soup", which tastes wonderful, but still needs a bit of garnish to improve the flavor. The villager doesn't mind parting with just a little bit to help him out, so he adds it to the soup. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the pot, and the soldier again mentions his stone soup

which hasn't yet reached its full potential. The second villager hands him a little bit of seasoning to help him out. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient. Finally, a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is enjoyed by all.

Tony Campolo is a professor of sociology and a popular speaker. He was once invited to a women's conference where he was to give a major address. These women were being challenged to raise several thousand dollars for a mission project. While Campolo was sitting on the platform, the chairperson turned to him and asked him if he would pray for God's blessing as they considered their individual responses to the goal. Campolo stood and to the utter amazement of everyone present graciously said "no." He approached the microphone and said, "You already have all the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room. It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when in fact God has already blessed you with the abundance and the means to achieve this goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible and accountable stewards that we're called to be as Christian disciples." And they did.

When Jesus' disciples ask him what he is going to do about food for the over five thousand who have gathered to hear him speak, he tells them, "*You* give them something to eat." Jesus invites them, and us, to share his yoke. Inspired by God's Spirit, they, and we, participate in the divine will. They look at the 5 small rolls, and the two dried fish, and distribute them wisely. I think they break them up into little portions and spread them among 12 empty baskets. Maybe folks who have been holding back add some of what they are carrying to the almost empty baskets as they circulate. Who knows. It does not matter. Either way does not detract from Jesus' power and love. We may think that 12 baskets left over is a huge amount, but not when you consider they had just fed over 5000. It would be like having one package of hot dogs left over after feeding a huge family on July 4. Just barely enough. If anyone had eaten more than their share, if there had been any greed or waste, someone would have gone hungry.

I believe today's Gospel message is one of stewardship. A message we can apply to our global economy, and can even apply to our household economy. We could cut up our credit cards. We can at least not use them for things we consume quickly, like meals and vacations. We can move closer to work. We can drive fuel efficient vehicles or live downtown and walk to work. We can continue to use those clothes and shoes in our closets without purchasing more. When we do make purchases, we can purchase our clothes and household goods on tax free weekends, on sale, and at less expensive stores. We can buy our groceries at Costco or Publix and dine in. We can tell our physicians we want only generic medications. We can grow our own vegetables. Those who can, could go back to work, stop being consumers, and become producers. But as we become better

stewards, we still struggle to find the time and resources to deliver God's physical and spiritual bread to the physically and spiritually hungry.

Movement 3 Jesus inspires us to make time to reach out

Newtonian physics says time is a continuous stream of single moments. After a moment has passed, it can never be retrieved. Because we live busy lives, we value our time. There is never enough to go around. So like the villagers in the story of the Stone Soup hoard their food, we hoard our time. We parcel it out only to our closest friends. Or to those who can advance our position at work or at the club. We have so little of this scarce resource, time, that we do not want to spend it with strangers. We do not want to waste it on those cannot help us. After all, we do not have enough time. So we build fences around our moments.

Many years ago, there was a woman who lived in a small village in France. Trained as a nurse, she devoted her life to caring for the sick and needy. After many years of kind and selfless service to the village's families, the woman died. She had no family of her own, so the townsfolk planned a beautiful funeral for her, a fitting tribute to the woman to whom so many owed their lives. The parish priest, however, pointed out that, because she was a Protestant, she could not be buried in the town's Catholic cemetery. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for the priest either, because he too had been cared for by the woman during a serious illness. But the law of the Church was very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence of the cemetery. The day of the funeral arrived, and the whole village accompanied the woman's casket to the cemetery, where she was buried outside the fence. But that night, a group of villagers, armed with shovels, sneaked into the cemetery. They quietly set to work moving the fence.

Maybe like the parish priest, we too have been trapped in our thinking. We have been slaves to time. Trapped by the very fences that we have erected. But in *Matthew 14*, we read that Jesus frees us from our chains of time. Because God's time is relative. *Ecclesiastes 3:1-15* tells us there is plenty of time to do everything under the sun. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die. ... He has made everything suitable for its time." I believe everything recorded in the Gospels has meaning. What Jesus said, and what he did. So I believe the miracles are enacted parables. They are performed not so much to tell us who Jesus is, as to tell us what God's reign is like. So on the grassy slopes overlooking the Lake of Galilee, Jesus takes time out to show his disciples how to feed a multitude. Because God's material and spiritual bread are not just for a few, but for many.

More miraculous to me than Jesus taking time out to feed the crowds with five small rolls of barley bread, and two sun dried tilapia, is Jesus' transformation of the crowd into a community. A community of people united in recognizing their need for one another, through the bread they share. Today's miracle records the

following: "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." Does this sound like our Lord's Supper? The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 empowers each of us to take the time to perform our own miracles of creating community, when we "move the fences" to include outsiders, when we welcome the rejected and forgotten to our tables, and when we give of what time and resources we have, joyfully and gratefully, for the sake of others. The Lord's Supper forms community.

Conclusion

A crashing global economy, personal credit card debt, hungry multitudes on a grassy slope over-looking the Lake of Galilee, and Newtonian time. Stone soup, moving fences, and God's time. I believe God calls us to stewardship of our resources and time, and to participation in ever-widening circles of compassion.