

Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21

145:8 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

145:9 The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

145:14 The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

145:15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

145:16 You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

145:17 The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

145:18 The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

145:19 He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

145:20 The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

145:21 My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Matthew 14:13-21

14:13 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.

14:14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

14:15 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."

14:16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

14:17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

14:18 And he said, "Bring them here to me."

14:19 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.

14:20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

"Christ is the Bread of Life - Christ is the Manna in the Wilderness"

Sermon message for August 2, 2020
Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs
Pastor Ben Daggett

Blessed and Broken

The feeding of the Multitudes

Amazing story with implications in many areas of life.

Jesus, in the narrative, has just learned of John the Baptist's death. His cousin John, the one who had baptized Jesus in the Jordan, the prophet and forerunner to Jesus' ministry, was dead, killed by Herod Antipas over that king's foolish vow at a fateful dinner party. Jesus seeks to retreat from the ever-present press of the crowds to pray and, no doubt, to grieve. But the crowds see where he has gone and they are there to meet him when he comes ashore. In this moment of pain and grief, when Jesus would have had every right to have time to himself, our King and Teacher instead has compassion on the people, and he heals their sick. What a contrast, from the grotesque scene of the earthly king's birthday banquet, in Herod, to this scene of abundance and life, this banquet of our true King.

The hours pass as Jesus is healing the sick, it starts to get late, and the disciples are ready to dismiss the people. They are tired, no doubt, and they say to him, "This is a deserted place and it's late, send the people away to get a bite to eat" (we might read between the lines -- and 'maybe we disciples can get some rest too'). But Jesus says to them: "You give them something to eat." This is remarkable, and its implications for us today are just as important. Certainly we can all point to crowds of people in today's world who are hungry, who need healing and a touch of compassion, and don't we often say to God, "These peoples' needs are way beyond our capacity, Lord. Send them somewhere else!"? And how telling that God in Christ responds, in this narrative, by saying, "You give them something to eat"? The implication is that God needs people to do the work of the Kingdom!

How beautiful to see the way that St. Luke's and Pleasant Street UMCs are carrying out this Kingdom work in times of pandemic and very real need.

And you have done so for many years! Between the food pantries, the Hope Center and Community Café, you have responded to this prompting from God to meet the needs of the hungry crowds. You are responding in obedience to be the hands and feet of Christ in Salem and Derry, and partnering beyond our denomination to move with God's Spirit among people of faith from various backgrounds and perspectives to feed and house folks who very much need the help. This is wonderful, and a testament to God's faithfulness in our midst! Praise God, and thank you for your dedication to this work, God's work.

What we see in the story here is also a profound mystery: God with us. God in us challenging us and prompting us and inspiring us to serve others in the name of Christ. I would venture to say, it's not so difficult to see God's hand at work in the wonders of Creation, or in art, or great works of music and literature. But God with us? God among people? That may seem a tall order, considering all our foibles and faults, our worries and warts, our wavering hearts. Somehow, though, God has called and chosen and sent people to make known and glorified the Name that is Holy and ever to be praised, in whose image and likeness we were created. People just like you and me.

Perhaps, however, you still feel daunted by the sheer amount of need around. You find the work of the food pantry and other ministries of the church inspiring, but still are worried that we are not reaching the crowds of the younger generations, who are unaware, even, of just how hungry they truly are, who don't even realize that the real food they crave is the perfect love of God as we see modeled, represented, and poured out in the life of Jesus. This life that we can even know ourselves. In the story, Jesus says to the disciples: "Bring me whatever you have." Jesus says to us, too, bring me what you do have, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, and just wait and see what I can do with your humble offering.

And here we come to a fascinating place in the story, and a fascinating place in our relationship with God: Jesus receives the disciples' offering, quiets and settles the crowd, offers thanks to God, blesses and breaks the bread, and gives it back to the disciples to give to the crowd.

He receives the offering, blesses and breaks the loaves, and offers them back to the disciples to give to the crowd.

When Jesus receives us, too, we are blessed, and we are broken, we are broken and blessed, and we are sent to the hungry crowd. The path of discipleship carries us ever and always back to the Cross of Christ. And Christ requires nothing of us that he has not already lived out and known himself. Without the Cross, without the brokenness that the Cross entails, the sacrifice and letting go of our prideful ways, our determination to our own will, to our selfish modes of being, we are, in Paul's words, "But a clanging gong or clashing cymbal." The Cross of Christ is the highest and ultimate expression of God's perfect love - the meeting point of mercy and justice - the divine paradox that dismantles and disarms the powers of this world at work within us and around us, but only when we take it up as he calls us to, and follow him to it. "This is my body," Jesus says, breaking the bread at his final meal with the disciples, "broken for you." In the laying down of our human desires and yielding our will to move in harmony with God's will is the death and destruction to our ego - and that's a fearful thing. But death with Christ, our participation in the baptismal waters, is also participation with Christ in God's resurrection power, in the only life that is truly Life!

Let's take a look at this passage in light of something Jesus says to the disciples after his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, since his words to them offer us insight into the feeding of the multitudes. Remember the story from John, chapter 4? Jesus stops to rest at midday by a well, and while he does, the disciples go to the town to pick up some food. He has an amazing conversation with a Samaritan woman in the

meantime, which we can hopefully discuss another day. But after the disciples have returned and the woman leaves the scene, the text reads: “Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?” “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

Jesus’ food is to do the will of him who sent him and to finish his work. He invites us to partake in this, his glorious banquet of doing the will of Holy God, the Author of our being and our Great Provider. In the Lord’s prayer we say - “Your will be done, Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The fact that the disciples collect twelve baskets of broken pieces after all have had their fill means a number of things, but two implications really stand out. Number one: nothing is wasted in God’s economy. The broken pieces still serve a function and a purpose, so much so that they are gathered up and saved. When you go to throw trash “away,” remember that there really is no “away.” The second implication of the baskets is authority. The number twelve in the Bible represents divine authority. There were twelve original tribes among the people of Israel. Jesus chose twelve apostles to walk with him, learn with him, and proclaim the Kingdom of God, God’s Reign on earth with him. The miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and the twelve baskets of broken pieces recovered afterward speaks to the abundance of God’s Reign, of the manna in the wilderness, the miraculous provision that YHWH had provided to the Israelites in their years of wandering, and which God still provides to those who turn to their Creator in trust and hope, and trust in Jesus as the Messiah.

And with that last point I would invite you to join me on a brief exploration into a deeper layer that this passage has exposed in me, as I have wrestled with it. In the first two sermon messages I shared with you here, I alluded to personal struggles and challenges that arose for me during the initial

phases of the pandemic. When I did, I went into some of the particulars and only alluded to others. Today I will extend the trust to God and you by opening the doorway to my soul a bit more. Just a crack, don't be alarmed. Since mid-February sometime I have been experiencing chronic symptoms, sometimes, but not always amounting to pain. This has been a new experience for me, and I have found it unsettling and nerve-wracking, to say the least. I have found that my mind has a tendency to spin out scenarios and implications, forecasting fearful futures of gloom and doom for my health, especially when the symptoms don't just go away, as they are "supposed to" and I wish they would. All too often I tend to camp out in those fearful scenarios, and I dwell in worry.

On Saturday last week, Milka and I went to Massabesic Lake to record a short video, and after we had finished, I began to share with her some of the fearful thoughts and images that had been playing across the movie screen of my mind, because of these chronic symptoms. In the video we had just recorded, we had spoken about the importance of dwelling on the things of God, from Philippians 4:8-9, and being transformed through the renewing of our minds, from Romans 12.

Well, the teaching we shared had just made it abundantly clear to me that there was a disconnect for me between theory and practice, and that I had not been dwelling in the noble and pure places, mentally, and the transformative touch of God as described in Romans had seemed rather far off, at least as concerned my physical symptoms and how I was relating to them. It was time to address the disconnect, and confess it. No shame. As we walked along the wooded path back to the car, Milka listened very carefully to me, asking a few clarifying questions, and then she asked: "When those negative, toxic thoughts arise and you can feel yourself stuck there, why don't you make it a point to remember that Christ has you taken care of, that you need not fear, and then use all that energy otherwise given to worry to pray for someone else who is struggling right now?" She had no sooner finished asking me this question, when a powerful sense of

gratitude and joy welled up in my heart. I knew implicitly that the Holy Spirit was in her response. A paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 1:4-5 came to mind, though I couldn't reference it then: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ."

What sound, practical, biblical counsel! Many times I find myself beating myself up with verses like this. After all, I should know this stuff, I'm supposed to teach it. Are you anything like me? Come on Ben, stop worrying! I can even begin to worry about how much I worry. Now there's a conundrum. But the wisdom I heard through Milka's question pointed to another, so practical and wise approach. What she had spoken of was the cross of Christ. In bringing my brokenness to God, in confessing my utter dependence and reliance on Christ, my soul finds rest in the knowledge that I need not fear, that I am taken care of, that my every need is met in Christ. In step two I deliberately and intentionally move to partner with the Holy Spirit in praying for others who I know are struggling or in pain. Suddenly, it's not about me anymore, suddenly my prayers are intertwined with joy and gratitude, and right then I begin to rest in the hopeful promise that God is ministering through those prayers to those I know are afflicted and beset with troubles. All that energy I had previously given to worry suddenly found an entirely different release, wrapped up in hope and the promises of God! Wow!

Please hear me right: chronic pain is a tough issue. I do not presume to have a prescriptive formula or solution to the puzzle of healing, pain, and debilitating illness. My heart goes out to you if you or anyone close to you are experiencing these things. My own chronic symptoms are still with me as I share with you. I am, however, relating to them differently now, and I'm relating to God differently as well. What I can say is that God is faithful in all

things, even the painful things, and that the wisdom in Milka's words dislodged something in my heart and mind that had gotten me stuck. If you are stuck, why not try this out, as a spiritual practice? Any time you sense your thoughts moving toward worry and fearful scenarios, why not treat it as an invitation to remind yourself that Christ has you, was broken for you, and knows your brokenness. You are held, you are cared for and cared about. Then turn your attention to prayerful intercession for someone else you know is confronting a trying situation right now. It could be anyone or anything. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide you! Pray for your family. Pray for your church family and particular situations of struggle or pain. We all have them! Pray for the sick and imprisoned, for those battling addiction, for those with COVID-19 and those caring for them. Pray for school boards deciding how and when to bring kids back to school. In the face of race tensions and the glaring inequities exposed by the pandemic, pray for the forgotten ones ignored or oppressed by the U.S. system, pray for the unemployed and hungry, pray for our state, our nation and its leaders, pray for the United Methodist Church, for all of us to respond in the wisdom of Christ, and abandon human schemes. Pray for churches of all denominations and traditions, the Body of Christ, to rise to the challenges of today's world in the empowerment and equipping of the Holy Spirit, to manifest the realities of God's kingdom to a conflicted world. We all could benefit from a little less worry and a lot more prayer.

I share my own story in the context of this passage because I believe God calls us to bring everything we have to him, every provision, no matter how humble or meager, great or small, strong or weak, bring everything to Jesus. In the story the disciples brought five loaves and two fish to their Rabbi. These provisions would barely serve ten, let alone 5,000, not counting women and children. But the disciples brought what they had. So it is for us today, since this story offers a glimpse into eternal realities. So it is for you: Bring your strengths, your skills, your creativity and know-how, but bring also your weakness, bring your pain and sorrow to God. And Jesus, our great Advocate through the Holy Spirit, takes whatever you offer

in humility and brokenness, blesses it, blesses you, and sends you back out to minister in his name. The work doesn't end with prayer, but it always begins with prayer!

Psalm 51:17

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

Still wondering about reaching the younger generations and bringing them the food that is faith in Christ? I am too. Let's all bring what we do have. Bring your humble heart and a willingness to move in agreement with the will of God. Bring your prayers. Bring every dimension of your being. Let's trust in Christ to feed the multitudes. Through us. "You give them something to eat," says the Lord.

Jesus' body was broken for us. His call to us is a call to humility, to brokenness, to sacrifice and service in God's perfect love. Blessed and broken. Broken and blessed. Amen.