

Scripture Reading - Matthew 14: 13-21 (NRSV)

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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but fives loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

"Where Are Your Chickens?"

*A few years ago, Karen O'Connor tells us, a pastor named Harry told about an unusual mission from God. He always began his mornings with prayer, as many of us do. One morning during his prayer time, Harry felt that God was leading him to fulfill a very specific mission: to buy **twelve barbecued chickens!** Harry didn't know what God wanted him to do with the barbecued chickens, so he drove around town praying and asking God to lead him to people who needed food. He sensed God leading him to five different homes in different parts of town. A couple of times Pastor Harry stopped to ask directions, and each time, a kind soul seemed to know just where God was leading him.*

In one home was a single mother who didn't have enough food to feed her children. In another home was an elderly couple with health problems. The wife had just been released from the hospital; she was too weak to cook, and her due to her husband's dementia, he was not allowed to use the kitchen appliances. He found similar situations in three additional homes where he stopped to give away chicken. At every home, the person receiving the chicken mentioned that they had been praying for God to provide food for them!¹ It's a marvelous thing. God took 12 barbecued chickens and blessed families all over that town!

*Here's the question for today: "**Where are your chickens?**" or "Are you the one to point the way to one in need?" Wouldn't you like to have the same feeling of satisfaction that Pastor Harry had? Wouldn't you like to see a miracle performed? Wouldn't you like to feel that your life had some ultimate purpose? Where are your chickens?*

We just shared the scripture text from Matthew's gospel. Similar accounts of Jesus miraculously feeding large multitudes may be found in all of the gospels. The context, as Matthew describes it, is that Jesus has been in the thick of ministry. He has been teaching and healing; training-up his disciples and sending them out two-by-two. Jesus had heard reports of love prevailing, and rejection. He has encountered his cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, and persuaded demons to leave their innocent victims. All of that would have caused anyone exhaustion. But then, Jesus hears about the beheading of John the Baptist, and that is where we pick up today's text. With the weight of that dreadful news, Jesus pulls away, tries to have some alone time, tries to go to a sacred space where he might rest, and grieve, and rejuvenate his weary self.

And the townsfolk were weary, and grieving, and discouraged, too. Their lives were in the pit of despair, oppression, violence, sin and death. Jesus was their hope! They would follow him anywhere! And so they did. And, as weary as Jesus was, he saw the crowds and had compassion for them. He healed their sick and continued his teaching. Jesus fed their souls. And when it was obvious that their bodies were hungry, too, rather than send them away to fend for themselves, Jesus told the still-doubting disciples to feed them.

Now, this was no small garden party. This was not a laboratory class room. This was a crowd of major proportions, who had gathered without even the benefit of telephones or social media to call them to the rally. 5,000 men + women and children...perhaps 20,000 people...were hungry. And with 5 loaves and 2 fish, Jesus offered blessing, sustenance, and satisfaction, complete with left-overs. ALL ATE AND WERE FILLED!

5 loaves and 2 fish became 12 chickens for those who were hungry, for those who were praying for a miracle. Where are your chickens? Do you believe in miracles? Does it still work today? How does that work?

First of all, God sees a need, and responds with compassion. Compassion literally means to "feel with" another. God feels the need, feels the pain, feels the longing, feels the prayer, feels the hope. And God seems to find some willing soul with something very ordinary, with which God does something extra-ordinary!

In John's telling of this feeding miracle, a small boy comes forward with the fish and the loaves. These are his barbecued chickens!! God begins with someone who offers a gift, starts a ministry, stretches out a helping hand, is willing to teach the young, the old, the convict, the seeker, the lonely, the socialite, the confused and the weary. And you might notice that like Christianity, these miracles are not "Lone Ranger" affairs. Each miracle is the result of God and humanity partnering together. Where are your chickens? Are you the one to point the way to one in need?

While I was the pastor of Central UMC in Honesdale, PA, that congregation was blessed with a "Mission Lady." You know what she is like. Many congregations and communities have one -- thanks be to God! Well, Mission Lady Betty saw that just one food pantry in Honesdale was not meeting the needs of the hungry in the area, so she started another one, in the office down the hall from mine. And with the support of the congregation and community, that food pantry was up and running in two short weeks! One day, while Mission Lady Betty was helping a visitor to fill some bags with food and personal hygiene items for her family, the visitor began to cry. That is not unusual in a food pantry, but the story that come as a confession was a new one for us. This mother was coming to the food pantry to get food for her family, so that she could save her budgeted grocery money to try to buy a dress for her Downs Syndrome daughter to wear to the prom...probably the only dance the girl would ever attend. And the mom did not know how she would find a dress with such a meager amount of money.

Now you just don't tell Mission Lady Betty a heart-wrenching story like that and expect that nothing will happen. Within days we were birthing a new mission ministry called, "Girls Gone Beautiful." We helped everyone in town clean out their closets as we collected formal dance gowns, brides-maids dresses, hand-me-down formal wear of all kinds, including a few tuxedos. When we advertised a day when high schoolers could come into the church to try on and select formal-wear FOR FREE, more donations started coming in -- accessories: wraps, purses, jewelry, shoes, much of which was brand new. One of our quilting ladies said, "I will bring my pins and sewing machine, alterations will be needed. And my sister will bring her machine, too. She doesn't know it yet, but she'll be glad to help." BUT, the package would not be complete without a hairdo and make up. So I approached my favorite salon and asked for a donation of hair styling sessions and make up for two girls, and they threw in manicures, too. And when the salon down the street heard about it, not wanting to be the less-than-generous ones,

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Rev. Rebekah Sweet

they donated the same. And so it went until we had hair, makeup and nails donations from 15 different salons in three different school districts. And the school nurse's in each district paid for the prom tickets! Quite a few girls and several young men who never dreamed of being able to afford going to a prom, went and danced their hearts out for one spectacular, miraculous night, and felt good about themselves, because one willing soul (Mission Lady Betty) offered an ordinary gift to a compassionate God with miraculous power to bring joy to those who were down. And when Mission Lady Betty found her chickens there were a host of disciples ready to help distribute those proverbial chickens to those who yearned for BBQ!

Do you have loaves and fish to offer to the God of miracles today? They may look like chickens, or sparkly gowns, or books, or golf lessons, or dramatic arts, or a round rubber ball. They may look like a crocheted shawl, or a candle, or a recipe, or a story, a hand to hold? Where are your chickens, and how will they be offered to feed God's children this day? Do you know others with chickens, who need assistance with marketing and distribution? Jesus' didn't distribute the fish and bread himself! The disciples did that, or at least they directed the distribution and clean-up! Where are your chickens? Are you the one to point the way to someone in need? Where are your chickens?

¹ Karen O'Connor in *More: God Allows U-Turns* by Allison Gappa Bottke, with Cheryl Hutchings and Ellen Regan (Uhrichsville, OH: Promise Press, 2001) pp. 79-81.