

“Gleanings”

October 17, 2021
Matthew 14:13-21

Rev. Kimberly Heath (wk 82)
Wall Street United Church



They were all a little fried. Have you been there? I feel like our whole world is a little fried at the moment.

Why were Jesus and the disciples fried? They've been doing ministry, giving and giving and giving. It was good — but they were human. Even when you are doing what you love to do and are called to do, you can become tired. Then we find out that John the Baptist has been beheaded. It's a setback for the kingdom and the cause, but it also just hurt. John was Jesus' first cousin.

Remember that when Mary was pregnant she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth while Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth understood Mary in a way that almost no one could, so I imagine that John and Jesus, who were the same age, saw each other and played with each other regularly as they were growing up. It is hard to know how close they were, but it's clear that at the news that John has been killed by King Herod, Jesus is deeply grieved. Grief is exhausting. It's really hard to give when you're grieving because there just isn't much in you to give.

I'll remind you that we grieve not just when we lose people to death, but when we experience any kind of loss. We grieve the loss of health, the loss of a relationship, the loss of work or even the loss of routine. We have had a lot of loss in the past year and a half, and many of you have had other loss on top of the loss that the pandemic brought. It's exhausting.

It is in this grief that Jesus decides they should get away to be alone and pray. So they get into a boat and cross to a remote part of the lake. The only problem is that Jesus is really popular now. People are hurting and hungry and needing so much that they follow the boat on foot around the lake. When Jesus and the disciples land, the crowd is there to greet them. I can't help but wonder why Jesus and the disciples decided to land there after all. If I were Jesus I'd be like "Keep on rowing boys!" But they do get out of the boat in that place. And though it's not the day they had planned or even wanted, Jesus gives the people what they need. Food. Jesus first gives them food for the soul. They were starving for

hope, starving to know they were loved, starving to know God had not forgotten them. And then, because they were all human, after not so many hours they were also starving for food.

The disciples want to send them away because though they had Jesus, who seemed to have unlimited sermons inside him, their food supply was very limited (or so it seemed). They had not packed a lunch to feed 5000. When the disciples suggest to Jesus that he give the benediction and thank them all very much for coming and encourage them to go home, Jesus says to the disciples: "You give them something to eat."

Come again?

I think we all get giving out of abundance. For the last few years my husband has planted a vegetable garden at my mother's house — she has lots of sun. I'm sure I told him last year "Next year just one Zucchini plant and no more!" Somehow that wise advice was forgotten and once again there were about 5 Zucchini plants and just boatloads of Zucchini. The only time of the year you really should lock your car in Brockville is Zucchini season! Anyway we gave out a whole lot of Zucchini at the evening service! And broke into to a few unsuspecting vehicles to bless them with our bounty. (Just kidding... though I was tempted).

It's easy to share when you have lots: lots of food and or money and lots of energy and people willing to serve.

It's not so easy giving when you don't have enough.

That kind of giving comes from a deeper place. *St. John of Avila (1500-1569) wrote that "One act of thanksgiving when things go wrong with us is worth a thousand thanks when things are agreeable to our inclination."* When we give thanks, and when we simply give when we are in a place of scarcity, it requires us to give from a deeper place — from a place of faith.

If you are a Christian, if you have decided to follow Jesus, then you are called to give and to feed the hungry. Scriptures related to this are all through the Bible.

One of the Old Testament teachings was that of deliberately leaving produce for the poor to gather. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ... You shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:9-10). Do you remember the story of Ruth and Naomi? When they get back to Bethlehem, they have nothing, but it was the season for harvesting the barley, and Ruth goes to the Boaz' field to glean what the workers are told to leave behind.

I'm guessing that for farmers this was easy enough to do in a season of plenty — when the sun and the rain had been just right and they still had food left over

from the year before. But not every year is like that. Some years have too much sun or too much rain and storms. Some years the yield is terrible. Farmers buy insurance today to mitigate against loss, but in the time of the Bible there was no insurance — just hope and prayers that there would be enough. In times of loss, it could not have been easy to deliberately leave some of the harvest for those who had even less to gather.

Today is World Food Day. It is harvest time in Canada and it's the time when we remember on the one hand the abundance of food as well as the hunger and food insecurity that so many face in our community and especially in the world. According to the United Nations, *690 million* people will go to bed hungry tonight. And hunger is skyrocketing. The UN says that if the current trends continue that by the end of this decade the number of people significantly affected by hunger and food insecurity will rise to *840 million*.

The reasons hunger is such a huge issue are complex. Climate change, fires, floods and drought can cause hunger, so can war and poverty. The pandemic increased hunger issues. When the world shut down so many were no longer able to work. We were fortunate in Canada to have had the government subsidy, but most of the world was not so lucky.

When you live pay check to pay check there is no buffer for extended unemployment. We are very aware of how housing costs have gone up dramatically. When you are spending more on your monthly rent there is less and less money for food. There have also been supply issues which continue— that result in food not getting to places and when it does the food is more expensive. Rising oil prices increases the cost of food. When people were forbidden from gathering it made markets and places where food is normally purchased less accessible.

The Fred Victor Centre in Toronto is an outreach centre that provides food, shelter, counselling and support to people living in poverty or experiencing homelessness. This is one of many organizations that are supported by the United Church of Canada's Mission & Service Fund.

They saw a 40% increase in the number of meals it served during the pandemic from previous years. Their clients were worried at the beginning of the pandemic about where they would find food, as so many food services had shut down, but the Centre was able to continue and meet the rising needs partly thanks to the M&S fund. One of the neat things they do to help is by creating and running over 240 community gardens.

As Keith Hambly, the CEO of the Fred Victor centre said: "The pandemic has pushed more people into poverty. More people are experiencing food insecurity and hunger. That is why we see these gardens as more than just plots of land with plants growing in them. For **every harvest that makes its way onto plates**

and into bellies, and for every resident who feels empowered by their surroundings, these gardens represent our vision for healthy and thriving communities.”

Locally we have a lot of wonderful food initiatives. I think of the Food Bank. I think of Loaves and Fishes that provides a low-cost \$2 meal (and free for children) from Monday to Friday and next Saturday, (postponed because of weather) a group in the community have a potato gleaning work bee. Cross Town Impact organizes this every year to harvest potatoes from the owner of the Tin Cap Berry Farm. The potatoes are harvested and given to area food banks and places like our church who serve food to people who don't have enough.

And think of our Sunday Suppers. We served over 238 free take-out Thanksgiving meals on Sunday! The line-up was all the way to Wall Street Village and for a lot of the afternoon the line didn't look like it was getting any shorter. For the entire 2.5 hours there was no lull, there was always someone waiting to get a meal. Why were there so many people? Was it because our church's reputation for serving seriously delicious meals has gotten out or because the need is greater? I'm guessing it's both. For local people the cost is a significant issue, but so is having the ability to cook. I remember one member of our church who lived in a tiny apartment and all they had to cook with was a hot plate. When that is all you have, what you eat is pretty limited.

I am so grateful that at the start of the pandemic this church reached out to the Health Unit to find out how we could safely continue this Sunday Supper ministry in a new way because the need is so great. Not all the Sunday Supper churches were able to adapt to offering take-out meals. Currently there is no church serving a meal on the 4th Sunday of the month. And I don't know of any food ministries happening on Saturdays in the communities.

There is a lot of need and a lot of creative things that churches are doing. I remember the church I served in Claresholm, Alberta had a wonderful program for expecting and new mothers who were at risk. With the help of a coordinator, the mothers prepared a number of different meals in the kitchen and then left with containers filled with nutritious meals for their family that they could stick in the fridge or freezer and reheat. It was a smaller group and I remember them having great conversations all while they learned new things to cook and went home with actual food, which would have given them the gift of time too.

The Bible makes it clear that we are called to care about hungry people. It's a big, big issue and I don't have all the answers — but I am called to do something. I love the scripture reading of the feeding of 5000 because the issue of 5000 hungry people is huge — so huge the disciples just wanted to send the hungry people away and forget about them.

But that is not God's way and it's not Jesus' response. After Jesus tells the

disciples to feed the people, he asks the disciples what they have. What do they have? 5 loaves and 2 fish. In fact the disciples answer “We have nothing. We have nothing *but fives loaves and two fish.*” It felt like nothing. But it wasn’t ‘nothing’. It was something. Jesus tells them to give their something to him.

Jesus takes the small offering and does something more. I have to tell you that I don’t think Jesus did a giant abracadabra miracle here where he waved his hands and poof! there were tables and tables filled with heaps of bread and fish. That wasn’t his style. Jesus simply blessed the food — he gave thanks to God for the little they had, and then he invited them to share it. As they shared, somehow the food didn’t run out until everyone had eaten — just like the oil and flour that the prophet Elijah blessed for the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16).

We are not called to have it all figured out—to be experts in solving world hunger—but we are called to do something. To take what we have, ask God to bless it and to share it. Today that often looks like sharing money so that food agencies locally and around the world can do more. But it might be volunteering in some way. Perhaps God will give you a new idea that you’d like to try. Whatever you are called to do, do something. And first offer that something to God to bless.

God is a god of generosity and abundance. The feeding of the 5000 is a miracle that reminds us of the time God fed the Israelites in the wilderness. It is a reminder that God provides and when God provides, God provides not meagrely but abundantly. There are leftovers. May we be part of God’s abundance for the world. Thanks be to God.

* * *