

LIFE TOGETHER
Sharing in Mercy and Love

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During this season of Lent, we have been journeying together through the Gospel of Matthew as we think about what I means to live as a community of faith. Pastor Ron set the table for us in thinking about the common ground we can stand on even in the midst of the paradigm shift our church and society is continuing to go through.

We also looked at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and what it means to enter into radical discipleship.

Pastor Sunny then reminded us of how the disciples were made up of folk who came from very different backgrounds and former allegiances. But even in their differences, Jesus specifically called them to the work of the kingdom.

And last week we thought about that work Kingdom...and the misconception that the kingdom is supposed to be somewhere else...when in fact, Jesus calls us to create God's Kingdom on Earth, today.

So this morning we will be continuing to work through Matthew and be looking at two distinct passages which on the surface seem unrelated...however, I believe we may discover that they are deeply connected in the way we choose to live and love one another in Christian community.

Our first, is the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand.

It is important to note that this the only miracle Jesus preformed that is recorded in all four Gospels. Therefore we can conclude that this must have been a very important occurrence to the believers in the early church.

Now as we enter this story we must realize that at this time several things had happened. Jesus had just been rejected by the people in His hometown, as a matter of fact; He departed the area as they were attempting to push Him off a cliff. His disciple's had just returned from the mission field, a trip He had sent them on. Word had just come to Him that Herod had beheaded His forerunner, John the Baptist. Not only was John His friend and partner in the ministry but also he was Jesus' cousin, His own flesh and blood.

No doubt he needed time to get away, time to get alone, to grieve, to pray, to rest, to be with the disciples and hear about their experiences on the mission field and to teach them. He knew they also needed time to recharge their batteries.

So Jesus and the disciples got into a boat and crossed the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place to be alone. But when the people heard that Jesus had departed they followed on foot. When Jesus saw that the crowds had followed them, how did He react? Did He get back into the boat and go further away? Did He get upset that He wouldn't get any rest or time alone with the disciples?

No, far from being irritated by this intrusion, He had compassion for them and welcomed them.

Then we read on:

¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹

Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish, stands looking to the heavens, probably with His arms raised, blesses (giving thanks) and breaks the loaves and gives it to the disciples and tells them to feed my people and there was plenty for all. No, they didn't have their choice of the buffet bar at Sizzler, or a Double-Double from In-N-Out with fries and a shake but they were all satisfied. When they were full the disciples gathered what was left and there was twelve baskets full. There was more left over when Jesus finished than when He began.

There is an old saying in the church; you can't out give God – just try!

The miracle is a spiritual lesson for disciples of every generation. The hungry multitude is always present. There is always a little band of disciples with seemingly pitiful resources. And always there is the compassionate Savior. When disciples are willing to give Him their little all, He multiplies it to feed thousands.

Unfortunately, this lesson can often be forgotten by the church, can't it? Especially today when resources seem more limited...

I want to share with you a disturbing article I came across this week from one of our local news outlets...

“KCBS has learned that [a] principal church of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, has installed a watering system to keep the homeless from sleeping in the cathedral’s doorways.

The cathedral is the home church of the Archbishop. There are four tall side doors, with sheltered alcoves, that attract homeless people at night.

“They actually have signs in there that say, ‘No Trespassing,’” said a homeless man named Robert.

But there are no signs warning the homeless about what happens in these doorways, at various times, all through the night. Water pours from a hole in the ceiling, about 30 feet above, drenching the alcove and anyone in it.

The shower ran for about 75 seconds, every 30 to 60 minutes while we were there, starting before sunset, simultaneously in all four doorways. KCBS witnessed it soak homeless people, and their belongings....

...A neighbor who witnessed the drenching told KCBS, “I was just shocked, one because it’s inhumane to treat people that way. The second thing is that we are in this terrible drought.

Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the Coalition on Homeless said, “It’s very shocking, and very inhumane. There’s not really another way to describe it. Certainly not formed on the basis of [Christian] teachings.”

A cathedral staff member confirmed to KCBS the system was installed, perhaps a year ago, to deter the homeless from sleeping there.”

Now, first of all, I am not trying to pick on any particular congregation or denomination. This could have happened in many different places and thankfully this particular church has since apologized and is looking at different options as they move forward....

But this is a vivid reminder that we Christians do not always get it right. That there is still a lot of work to do if we are going to establish God’s Kingdom in the world today.....

The question we must ask ourselves is if we believe that God is big enough to allow us to care for all those who come to us....

Do we believe that God's abundance is greater than we can imagine?

Do you believe that if you provide the bread; God will take care of the miracles?

There are some theologians who have theorized that all along the entire crowd carried food with them...and when they saw they disciples offering what little they had it inspired them to share as well....and in everyone sharing came abundance....

I don't know about you....but that is no less of a miracle to me!

The miracle can be realizing that God has provided the community with enough to go around and we just have to step out in faith to share.

In the Early Acts of the church, it is written that all the people of the church help everything in common and no one wanted for anything. I don't know about you, but a church in which no a single person wants for anything because we all willingly and faithfully take care of each other sounds like a nice place to be!

And while we might not be back to that point yet, we need to be working towards that picture of the kingdom starting today!

What can you bring to the table.... – a word of hope? A helping hand? A mosquito net to a family living in an area plagued by Malaria? Are you willing to offer something?

And perhaps more importantly do you believe that Whatever the deed, whatever you offer....that God will bless it and spread it.

It's time for us to stop worrying about what seemingly little we have to give. Whatever it is, God will bless it and spread it to the glory of God's kingdom.

You provide the bread. Let God take care of the miracle.

And we can even take this to the next level....if we trust the words of Jesus we find that we are called to give more than we are comfortable with.....to give above and beyond what we think we can afford.

If we provide.....God will use it for others and we will discover we have more than we initially thought.

The Disciples were not always very bright or very spiritual. Neither are we at times. They just wanted those people to leave. There is a possibility that they were more concerned about their own hunger than that of the multitude.

Sometimes we can do this in our own church. Maybe not with food, but in other ways.

We decide the kind of music we like.

We decide the way we want worship to be like.

We decide what the appropriate way to dress should be...

We get nervous about the kinds of people that are hanging out in our parking lots and decide who can be here and who can't...

We have all missed the mark at one time or another....but that doesn't mean tomorrow can't be a new day...that doesn't mean we can't change our attitude about giving starting today....

And that leads us to our second passage from Matthew this morning, The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

Here, One of Jesus' followers, Peter, asked, *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

It's a great question. How many times are you *supposed* to forgive? At the time Peter lived, Jewish law said that you had to forgive someone at least three times. That feels like a lot, especially when you're hurting. So Peter probably thought he was going above and beyond suggesting seven. But listen to what happens next.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.... And In some translations it reads as 70 times 7.

For those listening, it probably felt like Jesus said, "infinity." Most experts would agree that's what he meant, too. To forgive *indfintiely*. To stop putting a number on the times you're willing to let it go.

But Jesus wasn't finished. He decided to tell a story.

The story opens with a man who owes a king a *lot* of gold. We don't know exactly how much, because 10,000 was the largest number that existed in ancient Greece. It would be like saying he had borrowed *Billions* of dollars. And the king wanted to collect his money. In fact, he's so determined to settle accounts, he's willing to *sell* the man's wife and kids!

In terror, the servant begs and swears he'll pay back everything. There's only one problem—he *can't*. He could work for the king for the rest of his life and still not make enough. No matter what this guy says, the king knows he'll never be able to pay what he owes. So the king does something that no one expects. He *cancel*s the debt. He makes it like it never existed.

And that'd be a great story if it ended there. But it doesn't. Jesus continues:

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

So this guy, who had just had his debt totally wiped out, goes and finds someone who owes him a hundred silver coins, chokes him, and throws him in prison.

Jesus knew his listeners would be appalled. First the answer of forgiving 77 times, and then this story. What did it all mean? Well, remember how the story started? Jesus said, *The kingdom of heaven is like...*

The *kingdom of heaven* was often used to refer to God's relationship with humanity, both in the future and in the present. Jesus began the parable by saying, “Hey, the relationship between you and Me is like this....”

And that's where it gets personal. This story isn't about a king and servant. This story is about *us*.

It's easy to look at the man in Jesus' story and think, “Wow, I can't believe he had so much debt erased and still wouldn't give someone else a break.” But Jesus is saying it works the same way for us. When someone hurts us, or sleeps in our

doorways without an invitation, in our minds, they *owe* us. The worse their offense, the more they owe, and the more right we have to make them pay.

But what we're missing is that we also owe someone. When we think about of the times we have missed the mark,

When we add up...

- Every lie we've told
- Every bad thought we've had
- Every time we've put God in second place
- Every piece of gossip we spread
- Every hurtful thing we've done or said to those we claim to love.
- Every. Single. Mistake. Ever.

It's a huge amount. But we as Christians have faith that God loves us and forgives us anyways.

And when we think about the fact that our debt is *anceled*, it's hard to imagine forcing someone else to pay for what they did to us, even if it feels like a big deal at the time.

But before moving on, Jesus adds one more thing after the story:

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matthew 18:35 NIV).

While some scholars disagree about the specifics of what Jesus and Matthew meant here, His point is clear: our forgiving others is a huge deal to God.

To illustrate the power of Forgiveness I would like to share this news story I came across on YouTube that was aired a few years back on the CBS Nightly News.

So how do these two stories: The Miraculous Feeding of the 5,000 and the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant relate to one another...and perhaps more importantly what do they have to tell us about living in community?

To put it simply, we must trust that the same abundance that God promises when we share our resources will also be present when we need to offer forgiveness to someone who wronged us.

As we saw in this news story, an act of murder led to redemption, new life and even new family.....if you ever question whether miracles still happen in the world, I have to tell you, you just witnessed one!

As we continue to head towards Easter...a time where we celebrate God's power even over death, may we remember that in our caring, sharing and forgiving one another that God produces abundance and miraculous redemption!

Amen and Amen.