

“Celebrate, Grow, Extend”
Matthew 14: 13-21
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Rev. Dr. Don Dempsey
Presbyterian Church of Palatine
Palatine, IL

The day has finally arrived, my first Sunday here as your Interim Pastor. We have all had to be patient, mainly the Interim Search Committee as we have had to deal with the presbytery’s need to do things “decently and in order,” the hallmark of our PCUSA way.

My wife Meg and I enjoyed yesterday’s opportunity to meet some of you. Thank you for taking the time out of your Saturday to meet and greet us.

As some of you know this is my 4th interim pastorate: I served the Lake Forest Presbyterian Church for 5+ years as an Interim Associate Pastor in a variety of positions the latest being their Interim Associate Executive Pastor.

I then served the Winnetka Presbyterian Church for approximately ½ year just prior to the arrival of their new pastor the Rev. David Lower, who has been there for almost three years.

Most recently I served the FPC in Michigan City, IN as their Interim for 28 months. Their new pastor began the middle of May and they are off to a great new beginning.

After I graduated from MTS, I served as a pastor for 10 years in 4 different churches. I then changed careers and worked in the business world for 23 years with 7 different organizations. Believe it or not, after all these years, I have found my calling – it is Interim ministry. I love it!

For 13 years I was an Outplacement Career Counselor helping individuals in time of personal transition to find their calling, I now work with churches in times of transition to help them find their calling.

In the midst of all my personal change one thing has remained constant – Meg and I have been married for 41 years! We have moved 9 times, but after 7 years in our lovely condo in Ft. Sheridan – we are there to stay!

We have two wonderful adult children, Brian and Becky, they both live in Aurora, Brian with his wife Jennifer and Becky with her cat Francie.

I am delighted to be here to serve the PCOP in this interim time. I will learn more about you and you will learn more about me as together we seek to Celebrate God, Grow in Christ, and Extend the Spirit.

Let us now all listen to today's Gospel lesson from, Matthew 14:13-21:

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.

Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

“The is the Word of the Lord!”

Jesus has just heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, the one who went before him to prepare the way, is dead.

Both John and Jesus started their ministries as courageous prophets, proclaiming God's justice, calling people to repentance, inviting them to find their way to God.

And now John is dead at the hands of an immoral King Herod and his family.

After hearing this terrible news, Jesus withdraws to be alone, to grieve and to pray.

Had such a tragedy happened to one of our close friends or cousins, our first emotion, even more powerful than grief at such a time, would be fear.

“We’ve been involved in the same kind of ministry,” we would think.

“We have called out the sinners and the powerful and the hypocrites, and we know what happens to prophets who tell the truth.”

We would be afraid that death was just around the corner for us also.

We can begin to imagine what Jesus might have felt after the death of John, but when it comes to fear, we would have to reconsider.

We are confronted here by the one, who always greeted his friends with,

“Do not be afraid.”

We can recognize Jesus’ emotions, emotions that we, ourselves, have experienced; but for Jesus fear is not one of his emotions. The emotion that is probably most prominent in Jesus after the death of John is a sense of urgency – the realization that the end will come very soon, that when he sets his face toward Jerusalem; he sets his face toward his own death.

But not yet.

For when he comes back from his time alone, he is met by crowds of people who have followed him and who are hungry for his words.

He sees them, he has compassion. Jesus literally feels their pain within himself, in his very body.

First he makes them whole: he cures those who are sick. And as the other gospels declare when they tell this same story, he gives them the good news of God by teaching them. They are so riveted by him that they forget everything else.

Twilight falls and they are still there as they have been all day long, men and women, together with children who are beginning to get restless and hungry.

The gospel writers disagree on who first noticed the failing light and the need for food – Jesus or his disciples – but notice they did.

The disciples wanted Jesus to make an announcement, something like this:

“Now, good people, you must go to the nearby villages to find food. We have no food here, so go in peace and take care of your own.”

But as usual, Jesus surprised them. He said to his disciples,

“You give them something to eat.”

Not the general imperative, “Give them something to eat,” but the specific

“*You* give them something to eat.”

We can hear their protestations:

“But we don’t have any food, Lord. The baskets are empty; the food pantry is empty. We can’t feed so many people. Don’t you see? It’s physically impossible. Look, all we have is five loaves of bread and two fish, and there are nearly five thousand people here.”

We recognize the panic. We have been there. There is too much need in our world. Too many people unemployed, too many people hungry, too many people hurting.

“We can’t do it all, Lord.”

But the Lord accepts no excuses. He says: “Bring me what you have,”

And when the meager resources are brought to him, he does what they have seen him do again and again: he blesses the food.

Now, the temptation is great – and thousands have given in to it – that is we have tried to explain away what happened that day, on a deserted stretch of land near the Sea of Galilee.

Interpreters have tried to rationalize the resulting abundance of food. The reaction is understandable:

It is frightening to stand in the real presence of the creative energy of God!

In order not to be afraid, we try to explain it according to the laws of nature. But we cannot. When the eternal enters the temporal with such force, our finite minds either close up or become overconfident. So it doesn't help to argue about the word "miracle" when we are confronted with this story.

What matters here is that they were all fed.

God in Christ takes what we have, blesses it, and works His goodwill through His blessing.

God wants us to be fed; He wants us to be whole, and He wants us to be nurtured.

Jesus sets an example for his church in this act of feeding the five thousand. The living Christ wants us to take what we have and offer it to God, no matter how little it is, no matter how meager our resources are.

When it comes to the needs of His people, God will not take no for an answer.

God will bless, but the rest is up to us. **We** bring the resources, and **we** do the work.

It was the disciples who were asked to organize the people and who served the food that continued to increase because it was blessed by the loving energy of the Creator. How can the church do any less?

First we bring our weakness to the altar, saying:

"We can't do it, Lord. The needs are too many."

Then we answer his question, how much do you actually have?

“Well, very little, five loaves and two fish.”

“Bring it here,” he says. “It is enough.”

And he blesses it. Then, wonder of wonders, we discover that, YES, it *is* enough.

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

The gospel tells us that: It is enough; it is more than enough!

Today as we begin our ministry together in this interim time:

We are told “do not to be afraid.”

We may be grieving;

We may be feeling overwhelmed;

We may be feeling lost, lonely, and abandoned;

We may be feeling that we don't have enough to get through this,

But in all of this we are to remember that we are blessed and that together as God people, we have enough, in fact we have more than enough to continue to live out our vision to:

Celebrate God

Grow in Christ

Extend the Spirit

This is the good news!

And the congregation responded with a loud and enthusiastic:

Amen!