

“The Heifer Farm; A Modern Day Miracle”

John 6:5-14

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I'm sure you know the story of the village along side the river. One day, a villager looked out on the river and saw a man floating with a broken arm, so he paddled his canoe out to rescue him. The next day another villager saw a woman floating down stream with a mangled leg. She paddled out to make the rescue. Same thing on the third day, a man with a bleeding wound on the head; and the fourth day, a woman with both hands bandaged. On the fifth day the villagers called a meeting. They were all feeling really good about their mission work, rescuing people in desperate situations. But they had begun to wonder what was going on upstream causing all these injuries. They wondered if maybe their mission ought to focus on the cause of the misery. So they ventured upstream, and behold, a factory with big machines but no safety precautions was putting everyone who worked there in grave danger. Those villagers set to work to force the factory owner to implement safe practices.

Thus, we see there are two kinds of mission endeavors: the downstream, rescue mission work that gives the participants an instant sense of making a difference; and the upstream, longer term mission work that is just as essential but not as immediately satisfying and glorious as the downstream mission. The village in our story, of course, saw the value of being engaged in both kinds of ministry.

Our Gospel story for today, the familiar account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, offers a comprehensive model for mission work. There are the 5000 people who are hungry and need to be fed right now. This appeals to the downstream mission work, the kind whose benefit is immediately obvious.

We, at South Church, are all too familiar with this kind of mission. We find it meaningful and life-changing to serve supper to homeless people at Peter's Retreat and at the South Park Inn. Knowing that one hundred or more of God's people will go to bed on a full stomach is immensely satisfying.

But then there are those twelve baskets of leftovers! The story teller never tells us what becomes of those extra groceries! Have you ever wondered? Have you wondered whether the disciples set up a food pantry? I have begun to understand the twelve baskets of leftovers as investment capital for addressing the longer term issue of sustainable agriculture: of teaching people how to fish, of empowering local villagers to grow their own food, tend to their own livestock, raise their own chickens, harvest their own strawberries, dig their own potatoes.

And this is precisely the mission philosophy of Heifer International. When our middle school youth traveled to Overlook Farm in Rutland, Massachusetts the last week in June, they were engaged in this upstream ministry of sustainable agriculture, enabling villagers in Tibet and Guatemala and Ghana and Appalachia to receive and care for flocks of sheep and goats and chickens and hogs, to feed and clothe themselves for generations to come, and to pass this joy along to their neighbors.

Five thousand people aren't instantly fed as in the Bible story. But five thousand villages, around the world, are blessed with the hope that comes with a wool blanket, a supply of goat cheese, a yak robe, a camel hair shawl, and soil that is constantly renewed by the composting of organic material.

Our middle school youth were learning the patience that is required for this longer-term, upstream mission work.

In the Bible story, there is a child. I like to think of him as a seventh or eighth grader. Probably attends Smith Middle School. The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand begins with his willingness to share his lunch. It's hard for Jesus to work with the disciples' negative attitude: 'are you out of your mind, a year's wages wouldn't be enough to feed this crowd.' But Jesus can work with the youth's attitude, 'here, I have enough in my lunchbox to share.' Thus, the miracle of **chasing hunger away** is a team effort. God is the captain of the team, but it takes many others, who, like the boy in the story, are willing to share what's in their lunchbox. Lunchbox of course is a metaphor. It includes a tuna fish sandwich, but it holds more than that. It also holds ideas and engineering and agricultural know-how and soil science, and animal husbandry, and financial resources, and prayer.

Often, during our mission week at the Heifer Farm, I would stand back and observe the students doing their chores or doing the community service projects or settling in to their global villages. What I noticed most of all is their wonderful readiness to share. During a global village simulation exercise, the people from Poland gladly shared their dry firewood with the folks from Kenya. And when it became clear that the people stranded on the Mexican border were lonely and afraid, the people from Ghana took them in and shared their fire and their drum and their songs. Even in the down time, I noticed a willingness to share the joy of friendship with anyone who appeared to be on the outside of the inside circle.

It is this willingness to share that gives hope to the world. Jesus can work with this attitude. It makes all the difference.

In our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, we say together: God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship. To me, the cost and the joy come in the same package. They come as we share what's in our lunchboxes. The cost is in the sharing. The joy is in the sharing. The Gospel writers understood this. People of faith have understood this for centuries.

We do these mission trips with our youth so they, too, will catch on to the truth of discipleship. It's not something we can really teach in a classroom or with words or even with stories. It's a truth that is taught by getting out there and sharing what's in your lunchbox: by milking a goat when you could be home watching TV, by preparing a meal for a soup kitchen when you could be home playing a video game; building a house when you could be home shooting hoops in the driveway. To dare to share is where miracles are born. What we learned on our mission trip is that Heifer International is a modern day miracle! Family by family, village by village, we are chasing hunger away! I've already committed to next year's mission trip because I remain in the greatest of hope! Amen!