

“Fair Division”
Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

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There are Bible stories that resonate with me because I like the story and the message that it carries, but there are other ones that hold a special meaning for me because they are connected to a certain time and place in my life—maybe they were the theme of the week from summer camp or were read at a special worship service. The Gospel story for today, the loaves and the fish, is one of those stories with special meaning. It is important to me because five years ago, on a warm summer evening, it was the first Bible story I shared at South Church. It was during my interview with the search committee. After asking me all the regular questions about leading programs and working with volunteers and pastoral care, the committee totally shocked me by asking me, with no advance warning, to tell them a Bible story. For a split second I was frozen with fear and racked my brain trying to remember if I had ever read the Bible. A lifetime of Sunday School and thousands of dollars worth of Bible courses flew out of my head. Finally I thought, “Fishes and loaves! Fishes and loaves!” I don't know if the committee saw the panic in my face, or if they were just a particularly forgiving and kind group of people, but I made it through the story of the fishes and loaves and here we are today. Ever since then it has been a favorite of mine—the story that helped me land a role in this wonderful church.

The interpretation of the fishes and loaves miracle I shared with the search committee is the same one I told you today. I still believe that the real miracle of this story is that people shared with one another—they gave up something of their own to make sure someone else had enough to eat. The disciples initially did not think about sharing—they were hungry so they told Jesus to send away the crowds so they could eat in peace. Instead of submitting to their wishes, Jesus tells them they need to

feed the people. When they protest that there is not enough to go around, Jesus takes the bread and the fish, blesses them, and hands them to the disciples. In that moment, they have a choice. They could have taken the bread and fish and ran for the hills. They could have decided that enough was enough, Jesus was nutty and they were hungry so they were going to leave. But they didn't. They changed their mind, and a miracle happened. They passed out the loaves of bread and the fish to the crowds, and there was enough food for everyone. The miracle is that they shared and that in turn, the whole crowd shared with each other, proving that five loaves and two fish could feed everyone.

I love that sharing is a basic lesson of life, one we teach our kindergarteners, but in the Gospels it is transformed into a miracle. For whatever reason--maybe it is our survival instincts from our ancient days living in caves and hunting mammoths for dinner—we humans have a hard time giving away something we think belongs to us. When we feel like we have to go without or give away something important that we think we deserve to have, we become afraid. We fear what will happen to us. This happens from small things like having to share part of one meal of our day with someone else all the way to really big things like fearing that someone is invading our land and trying to take it from us. When we make our decisions based on that fear, it is difficult to give away or share what we do have or what we have access to. This is why having a few loaves of bread and some fish for your lunch and then taking only a small piece for yourself before sharing with someone else becomes a miracle because the disciples, and then everyone in that crowd, set aside their fear of going hungry, and shared with each other. Setting aside that fear is the hard work that Jesus demonstrated to the disciples that day. That is that hard work that needed to be done for them to become a community.

You know how our middle school youth mission trip went to Heifer Farm last month? I actually did that same mission trip when I was a youth, but to the Heifer Farm in California. It was very similar to their experience, including a night in the global village. Our group got a portion of food depending on what country we were assigned to and had to work together to make our dinner and divide our food amongst ourselves. I don't remember what country I was assigned to, but I ended up in the group that

got rice and a can of beans for dinner. The catch was we weren't given a can opener to access the beans. Being the mature, trusting teenager I was, not at all prone to histrionic behavior, it took me about three minutes to freak out and decide that not only was I not going to get any dinner that night, but I was probably on a path to starvation and would soon perish. I'm not too embarrassed to admit there were some tears, some deep breathing into a paper bag, and heated bargaining with one of the farm volunteers to get hold of the can opener. I took life, including simulated-life-on-a-mission-trip way too seriously. Somehow I survived the night and had enough to eat, after all. I always remember that story because as irrational as it was, I felt a very real fear that I would go without what I needed. That fear controlled my thoughts, my words, and my actions. It shaped my experience and was powerful enough that I although I don't remember all the details, fifteen years later I remember exactly how it felt.

Sharing is hard when we start to think that our needs will come at the expense of someone else. The hardest thing to do in a moment when you are confronted with your needs and someone else's potential needs is to consider theirs right alongside yours. It's such a difficult thing to put into practice that there is actually a mathematical problem that has been developed to help people share better. It is called Fair Division. It is based on the idea that if we divide things equitably, according to individual needs, there will be enough to go around. But if we only consider our own needs, someone else will not get enough.

This theory can play out in many different ways, but one example of how the idea of Fair Division changes the way we think about things is buying milk. When most people go to the grocery store, they dig around to the back of the line of milk cartons to find the carton that has the farthest expiration date on it. They think, "I need a gallon of milk and I want the best one possible. That means the one with the farthest expiration date." If we were thinking in terms of Fair Division, we would also take into account how fast our family consumes milk and how long it takes us to go through that one gallon. If we did think through what we actually needed and made our choice based on that rather than our fear of not getting the best, we might realize that we go through a gallon of milk in less than a

week, and then choose the gallon from the front of the case, letting someone who drinks milk at a slower rate have the one with the expiration date three weeks out. In this way, theoretically, everyone is able to get the milk that they need, and there no longer becomes one best gallon that everyone is competing for. There is a whole formula that is beyond my comprehension that allows people to divide things in a way that feels equitable for all involved, ensuring everyone has a fair share, even if that means receiving a different amount if you have different needs.

With five loaves and two fish, Jesus demonstrated the Fair Division theory with the disciples. I think this is one of the most popular Gospel stories because it is something that remains a struggle. I've just come back from a vacation where I wasn't watching or listening to news. In trying to catch up the last few days I have become overwhelmed with escalating violence and wars and a national struggle concerning the fate of thousands of young children seeking refuge. As I absorb the pain that our world is going through, this story has stayed with me. Without being too simplistic, I wonder if some of the conflicts would change if those who are engaged in it spent some time with the loaves and the fish. I wonder how our perspectives would change if instead of worrying about how these events threaten us, we spent more time reaching out in ways that we could to those who need our help—those who are hungrier than us, those who are searching for a home or for peace or for a way out of this endless cycle of destruction and hostility.

Jesus' story of feeding the crowd remains a miracle because we still haven't figured out how to do it. We still haven't figured out how to really share with each other in such a way that it appears that all you need are five loaves and two fish to feed a whole hungry crowd. We have glimpses of it. We have glimpses of people and groups who understand what it means to give of themselves to others and to give their time and resources and energy to helping their neighbors whether they are right next door or across the border or across the world. Many of us have been recipients of other people's kindness and generosity, and many, many people here have been in the disciples' shoes and have chosen to share what we have with others. We know it's possible. We're just still waiting for the rest of the world and

advocating for a different way of making decisions—a way that is not born out of greed or fear but is inspired by generosity and compassion. In this way, we're waiting for our own moment when we are handed five loaves and two fish and are able to feed a whole crowd of people. We're still working on our miracle.