

When Nothing Is Enough

Mt. 14:13-21

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Today we hear a story of Jesus feeding 5,000 men
and the women and children who were with them.

And, afterwards, there were 12 baskets of leftovers.

The same thing happen again

after the story we will hear next week

when Jesus feeds 4,000 men

and the women and children who were with them.

And, afterwards, there were 7 baskets of leftovers.

There is a pattern in these stories:

Both times, Jesus tries to get away to a deserted place,
and the people keep coming

Both times, Jesus has compassion on the people

And the word Matthew uses, is a word he uses over & over
to describe Jesus' response to people in this Gospel.

The word means to be viscerally moved,
to yearn, to have pity in your viscera --
in your heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys

Jesus has a physical, gut-wrenching response
to what these people are experiencing

Then, in both stories, the disciples look at the situation
as if they are looking at a glass half empty:

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

Or the next time,

"Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?

. . . [we only have] seven [loaves], and a few small fish."

They don't get it . . .

Their hands aren't empty,
their hands are full!

Their "nothing" IS enough
precisely because it isn't theirs!

It's God's!

So the next thing Jesus does, in both stories, is to say the traditional Jewish blessing:

Baruch ata Adonai,
Eloheinu melech ha-olam,
ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.

Blessed are you Lord, our God, Ruler of the Universe,
Who brings forth bread from the earth.

This blessing is said before meals
and when the bread is blessed on the Sabbath
(there's another blessing for the cup of wine on the Sabbath).

In Jewish communities then and now,
this blessing – and all blessings -- are always a reminder
that God always sustains people in the wilderness.
So the tradition is to greet each meal,
each encounter, each event, each moment –
positive or negative –
with a “berekha,” a blessing.

It's a way to regain perspective –
To see that what is “nothing” in their eyes
is more than enough in God's
In the same way, our prayers of “grace,” the naming of our gratitude,
comes from our Jewish roots.
It's a reminder to keep hold of a larger perspective –
to see that what seems to be “nothing” in our eyes
is more than enough in God's
What we have among us IS enough.

And another thing the blessing reminds the disciples and us
is that God loves us as dearly as spouses love each other.
You see, the word “LORD” in Hebrew
does not have European overtones of a lord in a castle
ruling the serfs below in the fields.
The word we translate as “LORD” in scripture
“Adonai”
is the Hebrew word for husband.
It's the word Jews use for the intimate name of God
Y-H-Y-H that they do not say out loud
just like spouses have intimate names for each other
that are too precious to share with others.

So Jesus says the traditional Jewish blessing over the few loaves and fishes.
By doing so, he reminds the disciples
That they are God's dearly beloveds
That God does provide abundantly
And . . . they DO have more than enough.

The next thing we hear, in both stories,
everyone is fed,
and there is so much, there are leftovers.

In the first story, there are 12 baskets of leftovers
and in the second story there are 7 baskets of leftovers.
Anyone listening to Matthew tell these stories
would immediately have resonances with those numbers.

They would remember
that after the Israelites passed through the sea,
they didn't have water during their first 3 days in the wilderness
(now in Jewish tradition, anytime you hear the number "3" –
like "on the third day" –
you know there will be a transformation)
and the people complained to Moses about the bitter water
at the spring at Marah where they had stopped.
Moses, in turn, "cried out" to God
and God provided him with a piece of wood
to put in the water that makes it sweet and drinkable
Then the people traveled just a little farther
and they found themselves at Elim
where there were 12 springs of water –
more than they could possibly use!
There was more than enough!
And here there were 12 baskets of leftovers –
there was more than enough!
And anyone hearing that there were 7 baskets of leftovers would remember
that God completed all of creation in 7 days
and rested in that abundance on the 7th day,
and there are 7 blessings in the Amidah – the great Sabbath prayer of blessing,
and there are 7 blessings in the Sheva Brachot that is prayed at weddings.
They would remember that they were created and blessed
by a God who loved them as dearly as a spouse!

They could look at "nothing" --
and we can look at "nothing" --
as not having enough
OR

They could look at "nothing" --
and we can look at "nothing" --
as being open to the great abundance and blessings of God
with whom there is always more than enough!

The Jewish tradition – and now Christian, and Muslim, traditions – of saying a blessing,
and blessing the situations we are in,
reminds us to look deeper . . .

God is always doing something, even if we can't see it!

The Hebrew word for "blessing" – "berekha" –
and the Arabic word for blessing – "barak" –
come from the word for "knee" (berekh)

It is said that this is because wells
in the Middle Eastern deserts are covered with large stones
so that the water will not evaporate in the hot sun,

and therefore a person has to get down on her knees
to remove the stone and drink from the well.
So, any event that pulls the rug out from under us
and startles us to our spiritual (and, sometimes, physical) knees
is likely to be something that conceals a life-sustaining treasure.
It may actually conceal a blessing,
an opportunity for gratitude,
and it may not be a stumbling block
or something to be rejected out of hand.

The 14th century Persian poet, Hafiz, puts it this way:

He writes:

Complaint
Is only possible
While living in the suburbs
Of God

Or . . .

Complaint
Is only possible
When we have moved far away
From the heart of God

Twelve years ago,

I was in a substantial amount of physical pain for months
due to a one-two combination punch
of a bad fall followed, a few weeks later, by a car accident.

The simple act of walking was excruciating,
and sometimes downright impossible.

My life was limited in many very difficult ways.

I wrestled with the issues of pain and limitation for months.

And then one Friday, as I leaving to lead a weekend retreat,

My spiritual director said to me: “You have to bless this pain.”

My response, at that moment, was:

“No way. There is no way on God’s green earth that this is blessed.”

I alternately fumed and puzzled about my spiritual director’s comment
all during the two-hour drive to the retreat center.

Once I arrived, I limped my way to our meeting area
and asked for the help I needed in setting up the retreat space.

During the set-up,

I focused on the needs and hopes of that community for the weekend.

The retreat began well.

That night, after the first session, I spent some time journaling
about blessing my pain and my anger at the very thought of doing that.

The next day, during a break in our retreat program,

a woman asked to sit and talk with me during the afternoon free-time.
When that time came, she raised a question about a difficult situation she was in.
And, as we began exploring the matter,
I discovered that it was only because I had first-hand experience
of serious physical limitation
that I was able to wonder about her situation with her
and ask questions that came from the inside of pain,
rather than from “the outside looking in.”
In that moment I was shocked to realize that, indeed,
I had to bless my own pain and become grateful for it.

I also became grateful for my spiritual director’s wisdom,
for without his statement about blessing,
I might have missed the connection
between my pain and the greater need before me;
I might have missed the moment of grace
that brought me in from the suburbs to the heart of God.
The experience of pain I had rejected for months
became a blessing,
and an opportunity for something new.
Beneath it all there was a life-sustaining gift.

I hear stories like mine all the time.
Just last week, friends
who are attending a continuing education course this summer on the East Coast,
as they have for the last 4 summers,
told me that, earlier in the week,
while the wife – who is recovering from cancer --
was walking their large dogs
the dogs took off together after a squirrel
and she had a very nasty fall.
She knew she wasn’t going to strong enough
to walk the dogs during the day
while her husband was in class.
They weren’t sure what they could do,
except have her husband just walk the dogs
in the morning and evening.
When her husband mentioned this in class
he learned, for the first time in the 4 years they’d been there,
about a wonderful dog park nearby.
Now it’s working out beautifully for everyone
the husband can focus on classes on not on the dogs,
the wife has a beautiful place to be outside,
and the dogs are very tired out at the end of the day.
What looked like limitation –
not being able to exercise the dogs enough –

turned out to be abundance and blessing
in the form of a dog park!

So like the disciples who gathered around Jesus
who were caught off guard
and who were so certain that nothing would be enough,
Today we are called to pay attention
when we are caught off guard,
when there doesn't seem to be enough,
when there's nothing we can do,
when God seems far away.

We are called to reframe the situation from God's point of view
and ask:

How did we get to this glass-half-empty place?
How might this actually be a blessing,
an opportunity to change our perspective,
an opportunity to rely on God?
How might this moment be a path home to God's heart?

Notes:

Ladinsky, Daniel (Trans.). *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1999. See p. 215.

Dilenschneider, Anne. Gratitude: Leaving the Suburbs of God, *Huffington Post*, 1/9/2010.

English Bibles translate "Adonai" as "Lord," so we often connect the word with a feudal sense of "lord" and forget that the Hebrew word is only a substitute for the name of God (YHVH) – a name so intimately revealed that it must not be said aloud, like the intimate name of one's spouse.

TEXTS:

Matthew 14:31-21

Now when Jesus heard this [that John the Baptist had been killed], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When 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.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 15:29-39

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” The disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?” Jesus asked them, “How many loaves have you?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.