

“Earn-Save-Give”

October 22, 2017

first series – Stewardship

The story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle story - other than the resurrection of Jesus - that appears in all four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all include it in their telling of the Good News of Jesus Christ. They all make sure that it's included with some slight variations, which, at the very least, probably means that it's important.

Sure, it's important; it's a miracle story! Jesus performed miracles - one way that people came to believe that he was God “in the flesh” - Lord and Savior of the world. And when we talk about Jesus feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, it's nothing short of a miracle! It reminds us of the amazing things Jesus does. It reminds us that God provides.

Reading from Mark's Gospel, we encounter Jesus during a very difficult time. He has just heard that John the Baptist has been killed. Like many of us when we hear tragic news, Jesus wants to be alone for a while. Yet, the crowds follow him. He sees their need and has compassion to put aside his needs and heal and feed them. Even in his grief, there's a miracle.

Jesus' miracles all serve one primary purpose—not simply to show God's power and might, but also to help the situation around him, like the feeding of the thousands. Yes, it's an amazing thing to imagine, but don't forget that Jesus uses human resources to feed those who are hungry.

The disciples are looking around thinking “How are we going to feed all these people?” Remember they've gone with Jesus away to a more remote place - out of town and away from the normal resources. I imagine the small group talking to each other and figuring out that there's no way they can control this crowd once everyone is hungry. They didn't bring enough for everyone. And we know what happens when people are hungry – sometimes they get “hangry,” too.

So, when Jesus says, “You feed them,” I can understand why they have some concern! “Do you see all these people, Jesus?” Mark's Gospel includes a discussion about how much it'll cost to feed this crowd - wages for at least half a year! And, remember, 5,000 is the number of men who are there. It doesn't account for women and children - probably closer to 20,000 in total.

In Mark, it's also not clear that the five loaves and two fish came from one person. The disciples simply go into the crowd and collect whatever food they can find.

Jesus invites the people to sit down, blesses the food from among the crowd, and they eat - and there are leftovers, too!

We're focusing on putting God first in living and giving. We've talked about idols we worship and God's call for us to make God the center and worship God the Giver - not the gifts God gives. Last week, we talked about how we form our relationship to money, how work is a gift to God that helps us serve God with our gifts, how debt isn't God's desire for us, and how debt really holds us captive from the freedom God wants for us.

The sermon title comes from practical advice that John Wesley offered in the 1700's when it comes to the use of money. He said, "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can." For Wesley, these were principles of a disciplined life. These three guidelines were a part of faithful living.

He was concerned with how to help people manage their money in ways that were consistent with their faith in Jesus Christ - no matter how much they had. And the question is still relevant: do we manage our money, or does our money manage us? Notice that "spend all you can" isn't a part of his advice on how to use money.

We earn all we can through work, which is a gift of God where we use our gifts to make a difference in the world. We earn all we can looking to the outcome, not the income. Pastor Mike Slaughter puts it this way: We are channels for God's love to flow through, not dams that stop and hold resources. God gives us gifts (talents, resources, abilities) to be used, not collected and stored away.

So it might sound strange to say "save all you can." We save to be prepared for whatever the future may hold. We know that there are times of feast and times of famine. Ultimately, we can't spend more than we make, though many of us do. Saving takes discipline. One resource says that the average American saves less than 5% of their income. Saving is a biblical directive.

As we discussed last week, debt isn't a way that God calls us to live. But, to be clear, saving isn't hoarding. We don't save it all for ourselves. Saving can become idolatry if pushed too far. What we save isn't to be collected; it's to be used to give God glory.

We save so we can give. We give because we respond to God's generosity and giving to us. And it's giving money and time. Our Faith Commitment isn't just an amount of money, though it's important to remember that our budget is self-funded. Our commitment also includes the ways that we intend to pray for one another, be present in worship and support each other, serve in this congregation and community, and witness to our faith. God is generous and giving, and God calls us to grow in generosity.

This miracle story is one we've probably heard of before, but I invite us to change the focus. Yes, it's about what God can do, but it's also about what we can give. So many times, we live with a mentality of scarcity: *There's not enough. I don't have enough. I'll never have enough.* Have you ever said that about money or time? Some of that is a condition of our larger culture - always wanting more and never being satisfied. I'm sure that the disciples looked at the bread and fish and thought, "This isn't enough."

And I wonder if the people in the crowd were quick to give what they had. The crowd had to give Jesus something to work with. Maybe sometimes we feel like what we have isn't enough or doesn't make a difference, but when we give it to God, it's blessed and multiplied! Part of the call in this amazing miracle story is to realize what we have and take action - not just sit and wait - but to give our best. I read this statement:

SHOW SLIDE: *Five loaves and two fish are never enough until you start giving it away.*

I know that some of us can easily move into a scarcity mentality. But we worship and serve God who offers abundant life and hope! God who is able to do more than we can even think or imagine. God whose grace is greater than anything we can do or not do – grace greater than our sin - and whose love is steadfast. God who will take what we give with faith and trust and do amazing things! Part of this miracle story is in knowing that we can do great things with God.

So, how can we look at what God has given us and respond in faith and trust? Remember that word about being a cheerful giver? I know that cheerful doesn't necessarily mean smiling, but how many of us are joyous about giving? Perhaps there's a call to smile when it's time for offering, to smile more when we're serving.

God calls us to give cheerfully with gratitude and thanksgiving. Does our personal pattern of giving reflect God's generosity? We don't need to give and then tell everyone about it, but is generosity a value that we hold dear? Do we consider how God gives to us? With joy and love and grace?

While our giving supports ministry in and through this church, the purpose in all of this is to grow in our relationship to God. Regardless of where you are in your giving, consider this idea of "earn, save, and give." Remember those who offered the bread and fish - maybe they didn't think it was enough - but it was used to feed the whole crowd! And I'm sure that those who were there didn't stop talking about what had happened.

We're seeking to be faithful stewards of God's gifts in our lives, and I've been challenged by a pastor-colleague named James Harnish. He says this about the difference between charity and stewardship:

Charity can happen in a moment; stewardship takes a lifetime.

Charity may cause us to give out of our abundance; stewardship changes our financial priorities.

Charity is measured in the difference it makes in the one who receives it; stewardship is measured more in the difference it makes in the steward - the one who is giving.

Charity is a compassionate response to an immediate need; stewardship is a spiritual discipline that helps us to grow in faith and trust in God.

Is charity a bad thing? Absolutely not. However, our call is to love God and give to God first and remember that all we have is a gift from God. We're called to faithful stewardship that ultimately changes us.

When we gather next Sunday, we're invited to bring our Faith Commitment for 2018. Take time this week to pray for God's wisdom and guidance as you make decisions around not only giving gifts of money, but also how you'll pray, be present in worship, serve others, and share your faith. These are important times of prayer and planning for all of us.

Planning our giving is one of the best ways to make sure that we do it - and do it prayerfully and cheerfully. I know that I won't do something or remember to do it if it's not planned in my calendar. The same is true for giving. Making a plan helps us to stick to it and be faithful and generous.

May God help us open our hands and offer our gifts, knowing that God will bless and multiply them to change the world.

Let us pray...PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Dear God, Remind me to share whatever is in my basket today. You will do the rest.
Amen.