

The First Reading of Scripture is from Psalm 14:1-7:

- ¹ Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is no one who does good.
- ² The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God.
- ³ They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no, not one.
- ⁴ Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread,
and do not call upon the LORD?
- ⁵ There they shall be in great terror,
for God is with the company of the righteous.
- ⁶ You would confound the plans of the poor,
but the LORD is their refuge.
- ⁷ O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

One: The Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

Do you know the name John Bell? He is a Scottish hymn writer and a Church of Scotland minister. He is also a member of the Iona Community, which is a dispersed ecumenical Christian community of men and women from different walks of life. The community, which was founded by Reverend George MacLeod, rebuilt a medieval monastery on the Isle of Iona off the west Coast of Scotland. This ecumenical Christian community draws spiritual pilgrims from around the world to Iona every year.

Why all this history about John Bell and Iona given our readings this morning? Well, the gospel story from John's Gospel for today came alive in a new way for me, as John Bell engaged the participants at a retreat I was attending. He had a stack of black and white postcards and he explained that as the stack was passed, we were to take one and pass the face down stack along. We weren't allowed to choose the postcard, but simply to take one from the top of the stack. He cautioned saying, "And don't turn it over until I tell you."

And so, we waited until all 60 participants had a postcard in their possession. Then John Bell said to us, "Turn it over." He then proceeded to give us the following instructions: Take a few minutes and imagine who this person is. Make up a back story, so that you will be able to tell others how the individual on your postcard made his or her way to the site of the feeding of the 5,000. The room full of participants went quiet, as back stories were being imaginatively created in silence. Then we were asked to get into groups of three and share our stories.

I will never forget my image or the back story I made up, for it made this story come alive in a way that it never had before. Who would you be and how would you have made your

way to the large gathering that came to hear firsthand of this man named Jesus who taught with authority, gave sight to the blind, banished demons and healed the sick? Listen now to the second reading from John's Gospel.

The Second Reading from the Gospel of John 6:1-15:

¹After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so, they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also, the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that Jesus had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

One: The Living Word of the Lord

All: **Thanks be to God**

The Message – Love Multiples

The black and white postcard photo in my possession was a woman sitting in a beach chair. She had on a hat as well as sunglasses with a nose guard. Sun was not her friend, although it appeared she was prepared to spend the day at the waters edge. My mind was swirling with thoughts as the Galilean shoreline came into view thanks to my visit to this shoreline four and a half years earlier. I had walked along the Sea of Galilee many mornings and my feet remembered the tiny spiral shells that punctuated the sand. I thought to myself, the age of the woman on the postcard seemed too old to be a mom, so I decided she was a grandmother. She was at the water's edge because she was caring for her two grandchildren for the day. As she watched her grandchildren dip their toes into the water after lunch, a friend of hers filled with enthusiasm was shouting her name from a distance. The grandmother turned and motioned her friend to come and join her. But, her friend had another idea, as she breathlessly explained that Jesus was just over the hill and she wanted to invite her to go with her. The grandmother protested saying, "I have my grandchildren." But, the friend quickly responded saying, "He welcomes children." So, her friend passionately persuaded her friend and soon the woman was corralling her grandchildren and picking up their stuff and walking with her friend just over the hill.

What surprised me that day was who else came to see Jesus. In my group of three there was a thief who knew that a large crowd would make his work easy, as everyone would be paying attention to Jesus and not his sticky fingers! There was also a man with a hand injury, a carpenter who had been unable to work, who came in hopes of receiving healing from Jesus. It was intriguing to see the postcard images and hear the stories imagined by each participant, as we moved from a group of three to six. John Bell then brought us all back to together as a whole group and asked, "What did you do when the basket passed your way?" I know what my character did. She took some bread for her grandchildren, as her prepared lunch and snacks had run out. She could wait until she made it home, but not them." Then another individual said, "I had a couple of loaves with me and I put them in the basket!" Others said, "I came empty handed and grabbed enough to get me home." The room was abuzz with energy and possibilities.

Everyone was engaged, as we imagined how we got to the feeding and what we did when baskets of food passed by. This story came alive, as the sea of people became individuals with real life stories. I have to confess that I had never thought of the miracle of sharing! Yet, I don't want this miracle feeding to simply be explained away by sharing either. Something miraculous happened that day, for it is obvious that the disciples, knowing all the facts, did not know what to do. All they could see was an impossibility.

Could the limits of our knowledge and understanding be why Jesus asked Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip was quick to access the reality of the crowd before them, for he quickly calculated that 6 months' worth of wages would not be enough to feed the sea of people. "In the face of all the facts, no matter the problem, it is common to find paralysis," wrote commentator Cheryl Bridges Johns. In the face of the facts – well over 5,000 people to feed, not counting the women and children, the disciples were indeed paralyzed, for all they saw was the overwhelming needs and the lack of adequate resources.

Could this be our focus as well? Have we grown accustomed to facing overwhelming needs – raging wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes, and their paths of destruction; wars that never seem to cease creating waves of refugees fleeing for their lives; global hunger that seems insatiable as we see images of those suffering; ever increasing encampments of those without homes and the list could go on and on. It is so easy to sound like the disciples, "There are not enough resources to mitigate the overwhelming need before us."

There are not enough resources. There is overwhelming need. This is true for our city, our church, our country and our world. We, like the disciples, say, "What are our limited resources among so much need?" Not enough seems to be our field of vision in the face of overwhelming need, yet the gospel story today suggests that with Jesus there is always enough. When we place our not enough in the hands of Jesus, we find that any limitations and weaknesses become more than enough. The ordinary sea of people who gathered to hear Jesus, experienced the extraordinary in the ordinary loaves and fishes offered and blessed, resulting in 12 baskets full of leftovers. At the end of our knowing, is the beginning of love's knowing. Jesus had compassion on the crowd and instead of sending them away, he sat them all down. Jesus blessed the meager offering given wholeheartedly, for the way of the heart, of love, multiplies.

In 1946, when Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu [aug-ness gone-ja boya-jew] came face to face with the masses suffering and dying in Calcutta, she experienced what she called a "call within a

call," namely, to serve those suffering the most. Certainly, her knowledge, wealth and her wisdom were not enough to fulfill her calling to the poorest of the poor. Yet love's way led her to create the Missionaries of Charity with a small order of thirteen women. Today, there are over 4,500 missionaries who care for the least of the least through orphanages and charity centers, as Mother Teresa did. Love multiplied her meager offerings.

When a friend was diagnosed with ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig's disease), Karen, a nurse, stepped in to help, as her friend's husband couldn't bear the thought of putting her in a nursing home. This cruel disease affects nerves and muscles, eventually leading to paralysis and the family's insurance wouldn't cover home care. It wasn't long before Karen realized that her meager offerings would not be enough, for she couldn't take care of her own family while meeting the needs of her friend. Karen put her meager offering into Jesus' hands, which led her to start teaching others in her church to help. As the disease ran its course over the next seven years, Karen trained thirty-one additional volunteers who surrounded her friend's family with love, prayer, and practical assistance. Love multiplies.

In 1976, when Millard and Linda Fuller began Habitat for Humanity, there were few resources and a great need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. With a few tools and a small group of volunteers, they could have easily said, "What are we among so many?" Yet, they offered what they had to Jesus, which compelled them forward. Today, Habitat for Humanity works in over 65 countries and has helped more than 9.8 million people improve their living conditions since its inception. Love, indeed, multiplies.

As a church, I wonder if we are willing to offer our meager resources to Jesus? Our vacant lot, in the hands of Jesus, what could this become? What about our 12,800 square feet of dirt on the ground level of this sanctuary complex or our two patios. What about our education building or the John Knox Hall? When I think of this amazing church facility, I am almost certain that we sometimes sound like the disciples, cataloguing just how much money we don't have to do what could to be done with this space.

But, what if we offered them, really offered them to Jesus? I mean, what would Jesus do with this space to bless our community? What if we opened ourselves to Jesus' heart to address or meet a need within our community by offering these buildings? We can start small - thirteen sisters, one caring friend, a few volunteers with tools - trusting that love multiplies.

Yet, I hear the psalmist's words so plainly, "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God." Could it be that as a church we act as if there is no God? Could it be that we are not seeking after God, not trusting that with God all things are possible?

Friends, Christ has given this particular church all the gifts necessary to be Christ's body here in Redlands. We are to demonstrate these gifts in our life together in the world around us. We have not been called together just to meet our needs. We have been called together to bear witness, pointing beyond ourselves to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus. And the difficult truth for any church, is that we are called to be a community of faith, entrusting ourselves to God alone, even at the risk of losing our institutional life.

If we, as a church do not put our meager offerings - all our limitations and not being enough - into Jesus' hands, then we can be assured that we will not experience the miracle that love multiplies. If we focus only on ourselves and not the community that surrounds us, then we can be assured that we will not experience the miracle that love multiplies.

Did you notice the miraculous feeding began because a boy had five barley loaves and two fish? How might God miraculously feed others through us? There is a sea of need, yet are we willing to place our meager offerings in Jesus' hands?

Love multiplies. Love multiplies when it divides.

One last story, Jean Vanier did not create a new project or program or institution in 1964, he simply invited Raphael Simi and Philippe Seuz, two men with disabilities, to leave the institution where they resided and live with him in residence. Challenged by his priest, Jean simply offered his home and companionship and the multiplication of this love has been felt around the globe.

In Jesus' hands, love multiplies. Will we be wise and seek after God, offering ourselves and this church to Jesus? Love, indeed multiplies when it is shared. Amen.