

October 25, 2020

“The Loop of Grace”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 9:10-17

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Guess what? It's that time of year again when I'm going to have to talk about Stewardship. Stewardship. That's the well-mannered word pastors use when asking that you give away your time and talents and yes, your money, to the church. But you already know well the concept of stewardship, because, for one thing, yesterday's Christmas Fair was a perfect example. Just consider the Christian fellowship we experienced, consider the time and talents and efforts given by so many of you, consider the outreach to literally hundreds of people. All done with the goal of making and keeping John Wesley a strong and vital church in our community. That's stewardship! And, another thing - so many of you have already turned in your pledges for 2021. Which shows your love for God and this church, and I am so grateful.

Yet still, stewardship is a subject many of us don't really want to hear about. Stewardship sermons tend to make many people feel uncomfortable or guilty, especially when it comes to talking about money. But the truth is, stewardship sermons really should inspire us to joy because we are giving to God. Now the rest of the world out there may laugh at us for giving away our money, but let me assure you, we have the last laugh. Why? Well, let me go to a Bible story to explain. It's from the Book of Genesis, about Abraham and Sarah. Now let me preface it by saying Abraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety. And an angel of the Lord came and told Abraham and Sarah that they were going to have a child. And scripture reads, *“Abraham laughed “till he fell on his face”... and Sarah stood laughing behind the tent door so the angel wouldn't think she was being rude.”* But the angel was right – they had a boy, and guess what they named him? Isaac! Isaac, which means “laughter” in Hebrew, because obviously no other name would do. You see, the lesson here for us is that behind laughter and joy, there is the promise that God is going to do something great. Let me say that again. Behind laughter and joy, there is the promise that God is going to do something great.

And so let's share some laughter together with a story that you may have heard before, but it delivers a message. An American businessman on vacation was standing on a pier in a small, beautiful, coastal Mexican village, when a small boat with just one fisherman came up to the dock. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The American was impressed and complimented the Mexican on the quality and value of his fish. “How long did it take you to catch them all?” he asked. The Mexican replied, “Only a little while, Senor.” The American asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch

more? The fisherman said he had enough to support his family's needs. Perplexed, the American asked, "Then what do you do with the rest of your time?" "Well," he said, "I sleep late, I walk the beach, I play with my children, I take a siesta with my wife, Maria, and at night I stroll into the village where I sip wine and play the guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, *Senor*." The American scoffed, "Listen, I have a Harvard MBA and I can help you. Here's my thought. If you spend more time fishing you'll have the money to buy a bigger boat. And with the profits from the bigger boat you could buy several more boats, eventually owning a whole fleet of fishing boats. Then, instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you could sell directly to the processor, and with your knowledge, before long, you could open your own cannery. You would then control the product, the processing and the distribution. Of course, you would need to move to Mexico City, then on to New York City, where you could oversee your expanding enterprise." The Mexican fisherman asked, "But *Senor*, how long will all this take?" "Oh, about 20 to 25 years," replied the American. "And then what, *Senor*?" The American laughed and said, "That's the best part. When the time is right you would go public, sell stock in your company and become very rich. You would make millions!" "Millions, *Senor*? Then what?" The American said, "Then you could retire, move to a small, beautiful, coastal fishing village where you could sleep late, walk the beach, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife, and stroll into the village each evening where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

Funny, yes. But unfortunately, that's the way most people measure happiness, success and power. In terms of money and what money can buy. Our income and investments, our homes, our automobiles, our conveniences, are the most obvious standards by which we are measured. So is it any wonder we covet and, sometimes, even selfishly want more and more of the things of this world? Even to the point of making money and things, our god. But that's why today's miracle about the feeding of the five thousand is so poignant for us because it's really a lesson on stewardship. Let me explain.

Now first, note that this miracle is found in all four Gospels. It's that significant. In St. Luke's version, which we heard today, crowds of people followed Jesus when they heard he had gone off to the town of Bethsaida to find some rest. When he saw them, he welcomed them, taught them, and healed the sick. But as the day was drawing to a close, the disciples worried about what this enormous crowd of thousands would eat. They came to Jesus and said, "Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside to lodge and get provisions." That's another thing I want you to take note of: the disciples wanted to send the crowd away without helping them. But, instead, Jesus

gives them a lesson on stewardship, “No, you give them something to eat,” he tells them. You give them something! They protest, “But we hardly have enough for ourselves, just five loaves of bread and two fish.” Ignoring their complaints, Jesus takes the loaves and fish and shows the twelve disciples what God is able to do with their offerings. Jesus says a blessing over them, breaks them apart, and tells the disciples to distribute the food. As it happened, everyone in the crowd of five thousand ate until they were satisfied. Until they had all they needed. And guess what? There were twelve baskets of food left over! Can you imagine the laughter and joy among the people there on that hillside, as God brought forth something so great out of something so small? You see, in the arithmetic of us mortals, we should keep what we have because it always appears there's not enough to go around, there's a deficit, an insufficiency. That's why, when we make money and things our god, we always want more and more. But when we give our money to God, and trust God, there always appears a surplus - we receive more and more. More blessings, more peace, more contentment, more joy.

Bishop Robert Barron calls this the “loop of grace.” He says, “There is no better representation in the Scriptures than this particular miracle. God offers us, as sheer grace, the gift of our being, (as well as all our associated gifts; of our time, our talents, our money.) Yet the constant demand of the Bible is this: what you have received as a gift... give as a gift, and you will find the original gift multiplied and enhanced.” He goes on to say, “The hungry people who gathered around Jesus in this passage are symbolic of all of us, the hungry human race. We have tried to fill up our emptiness with wealth, pleasure, power, honor, and more. But none of it works. Why? Precisely because we are all wired for something greater, something more important than money and material things. And that's God! God and his divine love! It is only when we conform ourselves to this divine love, only when, paradoxically, we empty ourselves, that we can ever be filled. The five loaves and two fish symbolize that which has been given to us, all that we have received through God's grace. If we try to keep them for ourselves, we are ultimately going to lose them anyway. But if we turn them over to Christ, then we will find them multiplied, even unto the feeding of the world. We realize the certainty of this truth when we enter willingly into that loop of grace, generously giving away that which we have received.”

And that is what's happening here at our church. This loop of grace defines our mission and ministries. Though yesterday's fair, though our yard sales, through our on-line worship, through our children and youth programs, like today's Trunk or Treat, through our outreach, by opening our building to serve the hurting and the needy, when everyone else is closing theirs, and most importantly, by being a place for

those who are searching... for love, for hope, for forgiveness, and for meaning in their lives. And we do it all, yes, with laughter in our hearts and a joy centered on the promises of God. For as I mentioned earlier, behind our laughter and joy, is the firm confidence that even in the midst of a pandemic, even with the changes, challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead, God is doing something great here at John Wesley. Can I get an amen?! Amen!

Prayer

O Lord God, thank you for the many, many blessings you have given us. They are innumerable, and yet, we confess we often times want more. Forgive us, Lord. Help us enter into that loop of grace in which we give more because, by giving to you, we receive more. Help us to be like you - with hearts of compassion and generosity. Help us to remember that nothing is truly ours – it is only on loan from you to us while we are on this earth. And so help us be good stewards of all you have given us –our lives, our health, our families, our church, our money, your creation. May we, with love and care give all we can, joyfully and happily, remembering that St. Paul said, “God loves a cheerful giver.” And that way, we trust that you will indeed do great things in our lives.” Amen