

Did you know that there's another side of the lake? Did you know that there are villages beyond ours that earnestly seek the presence of God? And did you know that God's love, and God's depth, and God's dreams are not, and never will be confined to one side of the lake or the other?

Today's story isn't a typo. Today's story isn't a different account of the same event from a different source. Mark's author wasn't being flippant or lazy. Mark's author didn't shoehorn this story into chapter 8 to hide it away in the utility drawer like we might do for a spare part we don't know where to store. Mark's placement of this story is intentional and masterful.

On the Jewish side of the lake, Jesus fed 5,000 men with five loaves and two fish, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

On the other side of the lake, that's the Gentile side, or the not-like-us side, Jesus fed 4,000 people with seven loaves, and a few small fish, and there were seven baskets of leftovers.

*People.* I like that. We've now included the sisters, and kindred, and others who weren't mentioned in the first story.

In this second story, Jesus has compassion for a crowd of people who have come to see him, and now they are hungry, and he's worried that without food, they'll become faint and weary on the journey home. The disciples wonder aloud how they might procure bread in a desert. The story reminds us that Jesus is concerned about every neighbor. The story also reminds us that Jesus doesn't just work to reclaim the deserted spaces in our own neighborhoods, but in every neighborhood.

I want to tell you that I really do believe Jesus fed thousands of people. I'm not concerned about the logistical analysis. I believe Jesus had a heart big enough to provide for the needs of people around him. I take these stories at face value. I really do. I believe, maybe too naively, but I believe, nonetheless, in a God whose imagination and possibilities are significantly larger than my own. And how I pray each, and every day, that such a thing is true.

I also acknowledge that many of you do not take these stories at face value. For some of you, the story is a metaphor – Jesus feeds spiritual needs; or the collective acts of Jesus' hospitality are the equivalent of a mass feeding; or Jesus instructs or offers the crowd a mechanism for sharing, and there's a ripple effect that ultimately feeds everyone in the crowd.

Wherever we land in our interpretation, I would argue there is a common theme: Jesus is a catalyst of hospitality. Jesus either directly or indirectly responds to the needs of the neighbors around him. Jesus feeds the world in meaningful ways.

As the larger story of Jesus unfolds, the disciples, and by extension, each of us as well, move from being observants of Jesus' brand of hospitality to being participants in this brand of hospitality. That is to say, at first, we need Jesus to show us how to feed others. Eventually, we learn that we can be Jesus to others.

Here's where today's story becomes provocative. Jesus isn't just working through our own village. Jesus is transforming and equipping and elevating people across the lake to be disciples, too!

The miracles of Jesus don't happen in isolated, unconnected spaces. Jesus isn't a genie who can only dole out three wishes. Jesus is coming to our town, and the next, and the next, and the next. And every place Jesus goes (and HE GOES EVERYWHERE and MINISTERS TO EVERYBODY by the way), people become equipped to feed one another, to attend to the needs of one another, to be Jesus to one another.

The challenge for us, Sardis, is not recognizing, or even doling out the hospitality of Jesus on our side of the lake. I know you, Sardis. I know your generosity. I know your hospitality. I know your creativity. I know the depths of your love. I know them all, because you've shared them with me and my family in abundance. Give us five packs of Lance crackers, and two cans of sardines, and a meetinghouse full of Sardis folks, and a half-hour of attention, and I promise, you all will find a way to fulfill the spiritual needs of this community in a present moment. You've got that covered. Feeding the masses in our own bubble is not a miracle that's hard to believe.

We share and receive our gifts with one another in this community well – and that sharing and receiving is a multiplier. We share some big things, sure, but mostly, it's the little things. We share the breadcrumbs of our lives, and on first glance, those crumbs may not appear all that substantial, or even appetizing. These broken fragments – sometimes the vulnerable pieces we think are better swept away; the crust we don't think has value; the stale parts that seem too hardened to be reclaimed. Tears, and laughs, and fleeting thoughts, and hidden gifts that went unnoticed, and moments of quiet presence, and songs, and paintings, and prayers, and bowls of homemade soup all come to mind – and it's not hard to imagine baskets that overflow. The miracle is beginning to happen here, but it's not yet complete if it doesn't include the multitudes on the other side of the lake.

We will never really experience the fullness of God's abundance if we only have eyes for the breadcrumbs generated within our own walls. The Sardis community offers us a wonderful, but limiting sense of comfort. This is a safe and controlled environment to share our own gifts and receive the gifts of others. We are really good at inviting people to join in our style of multiplication. But maybe we could benefit from a refresher in arithmetic.

Jewish and Gentile is a rather subtle distinction in 2023. But in Jesus' day, the distinction represented populations of people with every conceivable demographic difference – different ideas; different customs; different languages; different ethnicities; different diets; different governance; different belief systems. And yet Jesus crosses over the lake, and offers the same healing, the same multiplier, the same love and compassion to both sets of people. And even better, both sets of people have equally powerful and palpable responses to the Spirit of God revealed in community.

What kind of breadcrumbs, Sardis, are we open to giving and receiving from people who are different than us, who occupy space on the opposite shoreline, who have met God in ways unfamiliar to our customs and traditions?

Daynette phrased it so poignantly in her series with us last May: what kinds of equitable relationships are we building with people beyond our bubble? Greg poked at it, too, earlier this month. There's a history of church folk, and especially privileged white church folk, ignoring the multipliers that are happening on the opposite shoreline – we've claimed to be the 5,000, entirely oblivious to the equally transformative experience of the 4,000. We've got to seek participation in communities where everyone has the opportunity to experience the role of provider AND everyone welcomes the grace and peace that

come with being beneficiary. We've got to give and receive, feed others and be fed. And we have to be willing to pursue spaces, and consistently, that require us to fill roles of mutuality and service.

So...I told you I had a special announcement. I suppose it's actually a social experiment. I believe we need a nudge to move us out of this meetinghouse, and into the world. I also believe that we need to share some of ourselves – our umph, our breadcrumbs, our hospitality – with people not directly connected to Sardis. I think what we have is worth sharing. But I also believe we need to share Sardis in places where we are less certain about the responses to our giving. We need to cross the shoreline.

Here's the idea. It's called Five Dollar Acts of Kindness. I have here, 20 envelopes, each with a five-dollar bill, to help underwrite an act of kindness for someone you encounter in the week ahead. The amount is symbolic: enough to cover the cost of a can of sardines and a package of saltine crackers.

Use it however you see fit. Pay for the person in front of you in line at Starbucks; add \$5 to a tip for a service you've received; stand in line at Aldi with a roll of quarters and help those poor souls who don't have change to get a shopping cart; distribute a cool drink of water to people in need; pick a favorite charity and send a just-because note attached to the small sum; treat an office mate to a vending machine splurge. You choose. It really doesn't matter. Just do something kind and spontaneous for someone you encounter.

The envelope includes a card that describes what we are doing. If you are so bold, tell the person you interact with why you are doing this, and encourage them to consider passing the kindness on to someone

else. Finally, share with the congregation, preferably on social media, what kindness you performed, and how it was received.

Here's the miracle of God. In Jesus, each one of us, as individuals, has the power to be transformed and to be transformative instruments in the making of God's ultimate reality. But so too, does everyone around us. The act of kindness is a spark. It's a reason, and a credible, non-creepy one I believe, to engage the opposite shoreline. And it could be an opportunity to develop relationships that return a kind of healing and transformation from sources we never considered or imagined. And maybe it's even a form of sacred arithmetic:  $5,000 + 4,000 = 9,000$ . May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.