

Isaiah 55:1-5; Ps.145:8-9, 14-21;  
Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The question is what amount of baked beans should I make for my family reunion? I realize it's not an important question in the big scheme of things (nor is it necessarily something I should be asking you in the middle of my sermon), but I am hosting a picnic for 22 people next Saturday, and I'm having trouble figuring this out. I know what size pan to use for baked beans on Memorial Day when I have 14 members of the Easton clan at my home, but this time it's 22 people from my mother's side. Look, some of my relatives I haven't seen since 1980. Maybe they don't even like baked beans. **Or**, maybe they **really** like baked beans . . . so I better be certain I have enough.

Of course, I know that at Thanksgiving (when we have our usual 14 Eastons), my mother-in-law and I always make way too many mashed potatoes, and we swear that next year we won't bother peeling so many spuds. Right. We'll probably do the very same thing next year. And we always worry there won't be enough turkey, so she goes and buys a couple extra turkey legs at market and we try to cram them in beside our turkey in my largest roaster pan.

Hmmm—maybe **that's** the roaster pan I will need to use for the baked beans. Well, I have 6 days to make that decision. I'll let you know how it turns out.

Do you see how my mind is working? As I ponder how to welcome 22 relatives to my house, I worry about **having enough**.

I wrote in the Trinity newsletter earlier this summer about this very human tendency of ours—that we look at our resources in terms of their scarcity, not their abundance. In other words, we look at what we have like it's a blueberry pie to be apportioned out, and carefully so, for when it's gone, it's gone. We're always looking at our resources—our money, our talents, our time, our energy, our very persons—and wondering, fretting, worrying whether we **have enough**. I know this tendency exists. I get caught up in this scarcity business. I constantly worry about time. I worry that I don't have enough of it. So I grasp it closely to me, guard it vociferously, only seeing the potential lack, never the possible overflow. And I truly believe this is one of my weaknesses, failings, sins.

Perhaps you get caught up in the scarcity business as well. Perhaps you feel stretched almost beyond capacity as you meet life's demands. Perhaps you think whatever it is you have is simply not enough.

Our band of disciples thinks that, naturally. In today's lesson Matthew records how the disciples look at the needy crowds before them. These crowds are the ones who've come all the way out into a deserted area to see Jesus, listen to him, be healed by him. These crowds stay, even though the light of day is fading, even though they've brought no provisions for an evening meal. And in this isolated location there is nothing to scrape together to nosh on. At least not for 5,000 men nor the untold number of women and children who accompanied them.

Now, when viewing our resources in terms of scarcity, we respond in interesting ways. One way is to suggest that people should look elsewhere for help. That's what the disciples did. In fact, it didn't take them long at all to come to that very reasonable conclusion: "Jesus, did you notice it's getting late? The distant thunder you're hearing isn't thunder at all. It's 5,000 growling stomachs. Send the crowds away, into the villages. There they can buy something to eat."

Jesus apparently doesn't listen to reason. He knows full well it's getting late, and that the crowds did not bring picnic hampers, but he comes to a completely different conclusion—which the disciples, to their dismay, are finding he does with increasing frequency. Jesus says, "The people don't need to go away. **You** give them something to eat." What we have in this lesson is a picture of Jesus' disciples suddenly looking at their roaster pan. And looking back at the crowds. And back to their roaster pan again. Then they respond immediately to Jesus' command. The roaster pan is not big enough. They say, "We have nothing but five loaves and two fish." That's all. See, Jesus? You'd need a miracle for this to be enough.

The disciples see their resources only in terms of scarcity. They look at what they have, and why, it's barely enough for them. And even if they themselves forgo eating, and donate to the crowd, once those loaves and fish are doled out to the few they could reach in the front row, they're gone. Read between the lines, and the disciples are saying, "Feeding the multitude is not our responsibility, Lord. They should have been better prepared. They're on their own. We can't possibly give them what they need." Read between the lines, and you read fear.

Now read between Jesus' lines, and he is saying, "Everyone can stay. This is where they belong. What they need can be found right here. And I'm calling you to give it to them." Read between his lines and you read love.

You see, the consequence of fear is vastly different from the consequence of love. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, writer and poet, said "Fear narrows the little entrance to our heart. It shrinks our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves." The disciples, looking at what they see as meager resources, are afraid and thus frozen in their discipleship. They seem powerless to do anything. But Jesus, looking at all the resources available, small as they may be, also takes a good look at the crowd, and has love for those around him. Such love spurs and motivates him to compassionate action. He wants to care for the crowds. He knows he can care for the crowds. And he calls his disciples to do so as well.

Pastor Brett Younger, a Baptist minister, recalls the spring of 1987, the first year he served a congregation in Indiana. The physical plant was in fairly good shape except for the roof of the educational wing. It was a flat roof, not the best design for roofs during Midwest winters. Each winter the snow would pile up on the roof, freeze, thaw, freeze, thaw, and the snow melt would leak into the classrooms and fellowship hall. And each year on an April Saturday, a group of men would climb up on this roof to lay tar.

I suppose laying tar in April is much more comfortable for the workers than laying tar in late July—I certainly had sympathy for those under the broiling sun this last week—but laying tar is always dismal, difficult work. Pastor Younger was grateful for the volunteers who were doing it. What he didn't realize was the men made it into an annual party of

sorts, and Pastor Younger—who really needed to finish his sermon for Sunday—was invited to the tarring party. What fun! Hot, sticky tar on hands and feet, clothes and hair. The joy of being high above the ground with nothing to prevent you from falling headfirst off the roof. And best of all, the jokes from fellow workers and the sightseers alike: “Hey, preacher, I thought you only worked on Sunday!” “How’s it feel to do real work?” “What in tarnation do you think you’re doing, actually earning your pay? HA! HA!”

After this experience, Pastor Younger reflected on it. Maybe the people were right. He thought, “. . . in some ways church work is a way for me to avoid rolling up my sleeves and doing real work.” And then he thought—maybe that’s true, not just for pastors, but for **all** Christians (you and me). He wrote, “We Christians are tempted to believe that our job is to describe the work that needs to be done, share this knowledge with one another and then keep our sleeves buttoned.”

Isn’t that precisely what the disciples did? They described the work that needed to be done, and shared that knowledge with Jesus: “It’s getting late. Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” There. Sleeves stay buttoned. No muss, no fuss.

We the Church—both the gathered body and the individual Christian—must be willing to look at ourselves very honestly. Do we only pay lip service to this ministry to which we’re called as we talk, talk, talk in our committees? Do we teach our young people and our newest members about compassionate service, but give them no concrete example in our own life, and no hands-on opportunity in theirs? Do we express a willingness to share our faith with others, but secretly express relief when the pastor shows up to handle the prayer and the “theological” conversation? Do we acknowledge in this house of worship all the blessings God has given us—our time, our talents, our possessions—but then promptly turn around and withhold them from others who are thirstier and hungrier than we? Do we keep looking at our roaster pan and think it’s too small? Or as Pastor Younger would ask, are our sleeves still buttoned?

When the disciples showed Jesus the food they had—the five loaves and two fish (what they saw as meager), he commanded them to bring their food to him. He blessed it and broke it, and then gave it back to them, calling on **them** to distribute it to the crowds.

See, Jesus did not let them shrink from their responsibility. He did not let them retreat from the needs of those around them. After all, remember that he told them at the outset, “**You** give them something to eat.” But because our Lord had taken up their meager resources into his own loving hands, and blessed those resources with his power and grace, what the disciples once saw in terms of scarcity was now experienced as abundance. All who ate were filled.

When trusting only in ourselves, the things we consider ours—our possessions, our energy, our strength, our capacity to forgive, our patience and love—will never be enough. We will always be afraid, so certain we’re going to run out. But suppose that, beginning today, we truly bring all these “things” of ours to Jesus. Let **his** hands daily bless our words and our deeds, our money and our time, our very beings, so that these “things” we consider ours will be made abundant, and bring to **all** peoples the life and the love of God. **AMEN.**