

Good Sunday morning from a warm hill in Rockport.....

There's a saying about things "coming in threes." Whether it's bad things or good things, they come in threes sometimes. We've had three bad things happen to us this year, so far – a vicious virus has overtaken us and killed far too many of our citizens. Economic hard times haven't been this bad since the "Great Depression" and have caused the loss of too many jobs and the closure of too many businesses. And, racial unrest bubbling up from injustice and bigotry for too long is all around us in our country causing tempers to flare and physical violence to burn people and property....

So, what good has happened in the midst of all that is bad? We have witnessed the heroic efforts of medical personnel and scientists to slow the tidal wave of the virus day in and day out, night after night, sometimes giving their own lives in the midst of this pandemic for the sake of the lives of others. We have witnessed businesses assisting one another and their customers to help them get through the economic hardships that have fallen on too many individuals and families.

We have witnessed the lifelong witness of Congressman John Lewis to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all of us, not just some of us, throughout his life and now beyond his life....

In our text from Matthew for this morning, it is written that Jesus "had compassion" for those crowded on the shore who longed to hear him and receive healing from him. How can each of us show that compassion to others during this challenging time that Jesus demonstrated so often to those he served and saved? There are many ways.... all we have to do is pick a few and do them....

Speaking of ice cream sandwiches.... We will gather again on Sunday, August 23rd at 3 p.m. to share in another ice cream sandwich social in Leach Hall, or outside in our parking lot at the church if the weather cooperates and it isn't too hot. Let me know if you can join us so we'll be sure to have enough ice cream sandwiches for everyone. I know we all enjoyed our time together, safely in masks and from short distances, in July at our first ice cream gathering!

Reach me at freerangepastor@gmail.com or leave me a text at 207-322-1948 to let me know you can join us on August 23rd!

Blessings to all this warm Sunday morning of Summer..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: [freerangepastor](https://www.facebook.com/freerangepastor) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks,

bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you're interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

p.p.p.s Thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to keep writing.....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, August 2, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

Come, all who are weak.
Come, all who are strong.
Come, all who are in fear... of life and of death...
Come, all who are brave and looking forward to each day,
no matter what happens.
Come, all who are sad.
Come, all who are filled with joy.
Come, all who want peace.
Come, all who seek justice.
Come, all who are seeking a quiet moment to simply worship,
together in cyberspace if not in physical space,
in faith and with hope.
Let us worship God together.....
Amen.

**A Prayer Reflection.... “Do Not Look Back”
~ words of Henry Ward Beecher adapted for this day....**

May I not look back on happiness –
or dream of it in the future.
I am only sure of today.
May I not let myself be cheated out of it.
If I can eat today, may I enjoy the sunlight today.
May I remember that every sunrise holds more promise,
every morning more peace....
No matter what looms ahead,
if I can mix good cheer with friends today,
may I enjoy it and bless God for it.
Amen.



A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

A sermon based on Matthew 14:13-21

“And all ate and were filled....”

Will you pray with me. Abundant God, we come to you hungry, but sometimes not knowing what for. You offer us sustenance, yet sometimes we push it away without tasting. Give us an appetite for your rich and bountiful table open to all people, O God. Then teach us how to share it with others. Amen.

The story of Jesus' feeding of thousands of people occurs in all four Gospels. It is the *only* miracle story that appears in all four Gospels, and it occurs in different forms a total of six times. Clearly, *this* story is important to all the Gospel writers. It has much to tell us about Jesus and about ministry.

Most often the discussion of this passage has to do with the miracle aspect of the story. Some see it as “a miraculous event of feeding hungry people that actually happened in the life of Jesus....

[Others take the opinion of] the sacramental explanation of Albert Schweitzer, who argued that Jesus conducted a symbolic meal for multitudes of his followers in the desert in which bits of bread were distributed as [listen carefully] a

'veiled eschatological [meaning concerning the end of all times] sacrament proleptically [meaning with anticipation] celebrating the messianic banquet, and that the account of this event was later elaborated into a miracle story....

[In other words, Schweitzer was suggesting that the story of the miracle feeding of thousands was a symbolic look into the distant future when Jesus would preside as leader of all with God.]

[Others agree with] the rationalistic explanation of H. E. G. Paulus, who argued that 'what really happened' was a lesson in unselfishness, as Jesus and his disciples shared the little food they had, which then shamed others into sharing their food, so that there was enough for all.

Ernst Renan's romantic *Life of Jesus* presented a similar non-miraculous explanation in which Jesus led his followers into the desert for a period during which time they lived frugally on skimpy rations, the account of which was later developed into a miracle story.

[And still others say] the story is not based on any particular event in the life of Jesus, but is a symbolic representation of the meaning of the Christ-event as a whole, with overtones of the eucharist [the Lord's Supper] and the eschatological [meaning dealing with the end of times] pictures of fellowship and plenty for all."^[1]

I have to say that none of these explanations make me want to rise up and say, "Amen!" And more than that, it seems to me the miraculous feeding of a whole bunch of people is not the central point of the story. Miracles can always be argued against -

it was a *coincidence* that something good happened,
it *didn't really occur* at all because somebody made up the story - miracles just don't happen in real life,

a miracle always has a *rational explanation*, we just haven't figured out what it is yet,

and my favorite, "I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes and have absolute proof that it happened!"

The miracle stories in the Gospels are wonderful affirmations of the truly "good news" of the life of Jesus.... if we believe in them. But many people think they are made up, sensational stories that lead them to say, "I can't believe in all that mumbo jumbo. It simply isn't true."

So is there another way to think about this most famous of the miracle stories of Jesus - so famous that it is repeated six times in different forms in the

four Gospels? I think there is. And it occurs in the first four verses of the passage, before the miracle even takes place.

Jesus has just learned that his colleague in ministry, the one who had baptized him, John the Baptist, has been beheaded. This is reported in a very matter-of-fact manner in the verse just before our passage begins. “His disciples [meaning John's or Jesus', we don't know which] came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.” (Matt 14:12) Then our passage begins, “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.” (Matt 14:13-14)

I don't know about you, but if I'd just heard some devastating and terrible news that affected me personally, I don't know how well or how willing I would have been to have compassion for anyone besides myself at that moment. But throughout the Gospels, Jesus has compassion - for groups of people, for individuals, for the sick, the dying, the outcasts, the misfits. And Jesus doesn't just *have* compassion, he *demonstrates* it again and again.

I think there's a major point here. First, *having* compassion for others is a very important. And second, *demonstrating* one's compassion is a crucial part of having of it. I don't know whether we're living in a world that is all that much different from long ago, but lack of compassion for others, it seems to me, is a major problem - in family relationships, in business, in national and world politics and government, and in how some are dealing, or not dealing, with the pandemic in our midst.

Compassion, according to my 11th edition *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, is “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” Jesus is the epitome of the compassionate care giver - the one who is both *aware* of the plight of others and has a *passionate desire* to give aid to them.

But then our passage goes on, “When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'” (Matt 14:15-16)

The disciples say in so many words, “Oh don't be ridiculous, Jesus, we can't feed all these people with five loaves of bread and two fish!” Then Jesus says to

bring the food they do have to him, and he blesses it and breaks the bread, and gives the food to the disciples to give to the crowds. And everybody eats with some left over!

Remember.... *Jesus doesn't do this by himself.* He tells his disciples they have to help him. That's us, folks. That's us. We can't leave Jesus out there on that hillside doing all the compassionate work by himself. We gotta help.

Congressman John Lewis wrote a piece shortly before he died to be published upon his death. That writing appeared in the New York Times this past week on the day of his funeral in Atlanta. I want to read his opening paragraph to you.

“While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society. Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.

That is why I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.”

Congressman Lewis ends his piece this way, “When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”^[2]

Jesus had compassion for *all* the people, *all* the people and said to his disciples, “You give them something to eat.” (Matt 14:16) Then he *worked together* with his disciples so that “*all* ate and were filled.” (Matt 14:20) With Jesus, Congressman Lewis calls us all to compassionate attention to the hunger for equality that has left so many starving for justice for far too long.

Even in the midst of this terrible pandemic, we need to keep doing the work of compassionate care we are called to undertake. Let us walk with the wind, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be our guide. Who knows what miracles might happen along the way!

Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism.... and all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali, Michael and Gail in southern Maine.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, August 9, 2020

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b;

Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Words to ponder today

"When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?" ~ Eleanor Roosevelt

"For it is in giving that we receive." ~ St. Francis of Assisi

"We must always remember that it is the things of the spirit that in the end prevail. That caring counts. That where there is no vision, people perish. That hope and faith count, and that without charity there can be nothing good. That by daring to

live dangerously, we are learning to live generously. And that by believing in the inherent goodness of humankind, we may stride forward into the unknown with growing confidence.” ~ John Gilbert Winant

^[1]M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 1995, p. 325-326.

^[2]“John Lewis: Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” appears in the New York Times, Friday, July 30, 2020