



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

**“God’s Economy”**  
**Scripture – Mark 6:30-44**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, July 22, 2018**

Since becoming a parent, fatigue has taken on a whole new meaning. I’m sure many of you know what I mean. When you’re caring for others — children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, or those who simply need constant attention — the demands on your time and energy can be all consuming. And, Lord knows, many of us have experienced that in ministry as well. Because — as soon as you open yourself to the suffering of this world — the need can become overwhelming, and the call to compassionate service can leave you feeling drained.

This is how the disciples are feeling at the beginning of this passage from Mark.

We pick up the story of Jesus’ Galilean ministry just as the disciples are returning from their mission. You might recall — before our journey through Mark’s Gospel took a detour to the court of Herod, where John the Baptist lost his head — we witnessed Jesus sending out the twelve “with no bread, no bag, no money” to cast out demons and to heal the sick (6:8, 13).

Well, now they have gathered ‘round Jesus to give a report — to tell tales from their adventure in the Galilean countryside ... They tell Jesus about the young man with a club foot, who’d spent his childhood on a mat outside the city gate, hoping each passerby would drop a single, precious denarius in his cap. And about the mother rocking her little girl, as the child screamed in pain from the fever coursing through her body. And about the throng of desperate hopefuls that would materialize as soon as the disciples reached for their healing balms.

And, as the twelve share stories from their mission, Jesus can see that the overwhelming need they encountered in village after village has taken a toll on his followers. After days of curing diseases and casting out demons, the disciples are running on empty — literally and figuratively. Even now, people are streaming to Jesus — so many, Mark tells us, that “the disciples had no leisure even to eat.”

So Jesus has compassion on his depleted disciples. He invites the twelve (*just* the twelve!) to come away to a deserted place where they can rest, rejuvenate, replenish.

But the crowd — that ever-present crowd! — does not give up easily. Thousands flock to this deserted place, so that it’s positively crawling with humanity by the time Jesus and the twelve climb ashore.

I can see it now ... Philip and Thomas exchange frustrated glances. James and John grumble, not-so-quietly, under their breath. And Andrew elbows Peter: *Ask Jesus if we can just stay on the boat.*

But Jesus, being Jesus, recognizes that the crowd needs to be filled with even a crumb of hope. So he has compassion on them and begins teaching, right then and there — in this not-so-deserted-place.

The hours pass. The daylight fades. And the disciples — who still have not eaten — are getting **hangrier and hangrier** by the minute. Finally, they interrupt Jesus: *Send them away! It's dinner time, Jesus! Tell the crowds to go into town to buy something to eat!*

No surprise to anyone — except his disciples, I suppose — Jesus has a different idea: “*You* give them something to eat.” You — Andrew and Peter, James and John, Thomas and Philip and all the rest — *You* give these people something to eat.

I imagine the disciples staring back at him, wide-eyed in disbelief. *You have got to be kidding, Jesus. We were promised a night off, Jesus. Just the guys hanging out, remember?*

But Jesus is quite serious. So the twelve — who've spent the afternoon watching the clock and trying to ignore their growling stomachs — the twelve now have a job to do: to feed the multitude that has crowded them out of their own retreat.

But there's a problem. A *big* problem. There wouldn't be enough to feed these people if they'd brought a boat-load of food! They start doing the math: Peter counts the people by the dock. James surveys the hilltop. Thomas takes the nose-bleed section. Fifty families there. Seventy-five over there. *Jesus! There must be five thousand families here!*

The disciples didn't bring an event planner. They haven't booked the caterers. They certainly haven't been saving up so they could blow half a year's wages on this party!

*There's no way, Jesus!,* they cry. “Are we supposed to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread?!”

Remember: The disciples are still running on empty. They were drained when they set out for this deserted place. No reserves of energy left, but now plenty of frustration to chew on. And, because they're running on empty, they *see* only emptiness. The twelve focus on what they don't have ... They don't have the bread to fill thousands of hungry bellies. They don't have the money to purchase thousands of loaves. They don't have the time to hit every bakery in Galilee before the bakers turn off their ovens and flip on their ‘Closed’ signs.

The disciples see an abundance of need, and a startling lack of resources.

But, Jesus ... Jesus sees something different. He sees women and men who simply need a meal. He sees twelve capable servers. He sees possibility. “How many loaves do you have?,” Jesus asks. *Tell me — what do we have to work with?* “Go and see.”

Go and see. With this command Jesus instructs his disciples to shift their perspective — to focus on what they *do* have, to open their eyes and see what God might be up to on this hillside.

For, as the disciples have surveyed the multitude and pictured the mountain of bread needed to feed this lot, they've lost sight of the transformative truth of their situation: That they're serving the one who calmed the storm and lifted a girl to life ... The one who blessed them with authority to cast out demons and cure disease, and sent them out to heal the world.

And because Jesus is in charge, this isn't business as usual. This isn't about calculating how many loaves they can buy without going over budget. This isn't about rationing bread, so that every person has just enough to hold them over until they get back to town.

No — this is a story of God's economy. And in God's economy the currency is compassion and sharing the means of success; problems become possibilities and meager resources are enough to refresh a multitude. In God's economy the community thrives when everyone has what they need.

Soon, everyone — the captivated crowd, the depleted disciples — everyone will see what God can do with five loaves and two fish. Everyone will see what a feast looks like in God's economy.

“Go and see,” Jesus says. *You might be surprised.*

Friends — you know the rest of the story: How Jesus blesses five loaves and two fish, before giving them to his disciples to distribute. How this meager offering somehow feeds a multitude. How — miracle of miracles — *all* the people gathered eat their fill and are satisfied. How there is bread to spare ... twelve baskets full. Enough for each disciple to have one, for the next time he needs a reminder of God's generosity and grace.

This is how things work in God's economy ... A world where *all* — both depleted disciples and hope-hungry crowd — all eat and are filled. Where seekers find their spirits and stomachs fed. Where a deserted place blossoms with life as strangers sit together to share a feast. Where scarcity becomes abundance, and there is enough for everyone.

“Go and see,” Jesus says.

There's a ministry in Center City Philadelphia that serves Jesus Christ by attending to the needs of their most vulnerable neighbors. Five days a week, Broad Street Ministry serves lunch for any who wish to dine in their repurposed sanctuary, but especially for those experiencing hunger or homelessness. They go about this a little differently than many soup kitchens, where those seeking a meal line up with plastic trays to receive an allotted portion of food. At Broad Street Ministry, guests sit at round tables adorned with tablecloths and center pieces, and receive a plated meal prepared by Broad Street's resident chef. Servers — usually volunteers from companies, schools, churches — bring out all the meals at once and ensure that diners have everything they need. All this to avoid the trauma of scarcity ... the trauma of never having enough, the trauma of having to fight over meager resources, the trauma that people living below the poverty line experience all too often. Broad Street Ministry works to ensure that those who gather at the table receive what they need. In this way, each meal is a glimpse of God's economy — where all eat and are filled.

But, here's the thing ... there is a *lot* of need. Philadelphia ranks poorest among America's ten largest cities ... a troubling statistic that is evident every time Broad Street Ministry throws open its doors. Each year this ministry serves over sixty thousand meals to those experiencing hunger or homelessness. The need is overwhelming. And I wouldn't be surprised if those who regularly serve these vulnerable Philadelphians feel a lot like those first disciples — depleted, drained, desperate for a little time away. Almost anyone who surveys the crowd streaming into Broad Street and does the math would draw the same conclusion as Peter and James and John: there is an abundance of need, and a startling lack of resources.

But, a few years ago, some imaginative and faithful people saw something different.

It all started when the owners of Federal Donuts brought their staff to volunteer at a meal and — as one of Broad Street’s pastors put it — they never left.<sup>1</sup> I doubt the team from Federal Donuts would describe it quite this way, but it seems they witnessed God’s economy in action. And they were inspired to participate in this work. Now, they could have simply made the commitment to bring their staff to serve on a regular basis; in and of itself, that would have been a valuable contribution to this ministry. But the owners of Federal Donuts saw their fellow Philadelphians in need of a meal, and they pictured their own restaurants, where neighbors with the resources to pay came to eat. And they saw possibility.

As some of you may know, Federal Donuts is something of an institution in Philadelphia. They have two things on their menu: donuts and fried chicken. (An odd combination, but it works.)

And they said: No, we don’t have the surplus donuts needed to feed a multitude. But this is what we do have: We have chicken backs. And we have chicken bones. And — you know what? — that makes chicken stock. And, in collaboration with the creative minds at Broad Street Ministry, they hatched a plan: “Let’s start a restaurant. Let’s sell chicken soup. And let’s donate one hundred percent of the net profits to Broad Street Ministry, so they can serve more meals to our neighbors in need.”

Already, meager resources offered up in faith were beginning to multiply. But that was just the beginning. They started telling others: “Go and see. Go and see what we can do with chicken bones. You might be surprised!” And others opened their eyes to see what God was doing in the city of Philadelphia, and realized that they, too, had something to give. Donations started pouring in from churches, corporate partners, individuals throughout the country ... five, ten, twenty dollars. The gifts multiplied. Because enough people opened their eyes to see that, together, we can feed a multitude.

So Rooster Soup Company was born. You can drive into Philly after church — get yourselves some lunch. And, in feasting on delicious soup, you’ll make sure others can come to the table. And keep coming to the table. Until *all* eat and are filled.

This is what a feast looks like in God’s economy. Meager resources multiply through the gifts of many. Scarcity becomes abundance. And — miracle of miracles — all eat and are filled: the served and the servants, those who are hungry for food and those who are hungry for purpose. And, by God’s grace, all who share in the feast are refreshed and renewed. And maybe even inspired to continue Christ’s work. Until there is enough for everyone.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly**

God of all things good, God of bounteous gifts, God who is our shepherd, we come before you this morning grateful for the countless ways in which you enrich our lives and provide purpose and meaning to our days. Grant us the quiet, grant us the patience, grant us the inspiration, to slow down and listen to what you would have us know. We are so busy, we are so distracted, we are so caught up in ourselves, that we often fail to hear your words. We see scarcity and you provide abundance. We fear we will not have enough and you remind us that if we share, more will be provided. You show us there is sufficiency and yet we wonder how that can be true.

So, as we worship this morning, may we be reminded of that which we know deep in our hearts – but so often forget – that you are with us. That, if we but ask, you will guide us, that you will speak to us, that your gifts and your truth are for all and that your love for each and every one of us is boundless. And, may we be reminded that in response to your love, we are called to seek justice, to work for peace and to act out our faith in ways that witness to your Good News.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Andy Greenhow, “Better Together,” preached at Wayne Presbyterian Church on November 9, 2014.

We pray, O God, for those who are not with us this morning. Those who are traveling or fighting illness or struggling with grief. We pray that you will grant them your peace and your strength and that through our actions they may feel your presence. Be, too, with all around the world who know firsthand the horrors of war, the ravages of hunger, and the pain of displacement from family, from home and from country. May we support the policies and actions which will help to bring resolution to the challenges they, and by our shared humanity, all of us, face.

Hear our prayers this morning, O God, those spoken and those unspoken, and grant us the assurance and wisdom only you can provide. This we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to how to live and taught us to pray...

**Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.**