

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

When I was in seminary, one of the spiritual formation groups that I participate in meditated on today's gospel reading. As our facilitator read the story, I closed my eyes and pictured myself as one of the disciples making my way along the edge of the crowd and moving toward where Jesus was. Everyone in the crowd was seated by that point.

And when I got to where Jesus was sitting, he handed me my share of the fish and bread to distribute. The image was so vivid that I remember thinking as I received it, "I hope this is enough." Jesus looked at me and said, "Take what I've given you and go."

So, I turned and went. And that's where the image ended for me.

And it's fitting that that's where it ended because the story also simply ends. Everyone eats their fill, the disciples gather the leftovers, and that's it. There's no response from the people. No acknowledgment that they know they've just participated in a miracle. We don't even know what the disciples were thinking as they gathered the leftovers.

This story, the feeding of the multitude, is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels in some form. Some of the details vary, but the overall event is the same: a crowd of people is hungry; Jesus blesses the little bit of food that's available; everyone eats and is satisfied; and there are leftovers.

What else is there to say, except that it's a miracle – pure and simple?

When we read this story, we often get caught up in how it happened – the mechanics of it. Like, did the loaves and fish miraculously multiply? Or, did the crowd begin sharing the little food each of them had brought?

But when we set that aside and take it together with the teachings of Jesus that have led up to this moment, we discover what it reveals about the Kingdom of God. That in the coming Kingdom, God's people will be fed, together, in community.

It's the vision that the prophet Isaiah cast after the exile. It's the vision Jesus enacted here in this event.

Over the last three Sundays, we heard parables of Jesus that describe the Kingdom of Heaven. A sower sowing seeds and the different types of soil the seeds land on. Weeds growing alongside wheat. And mustard seed.

Each of the pastors who preached on these readings, because I wasn't here, wove the teachings of Jesus together with what it means for us as his disciples today. And I'll recap them in just a minute in case you've forgotten them.

Because these teachings are abruptly interrupted by the execution of John the Baptist. That came out of an event that was exclusive and, probably, gluttonous. It's the opposite of the vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was shocking enough that, when he heard about it, Jesus tried to go and be by himself for a bit.

So, when we pick back up in our reading today with Jesus having compassion for the people who had gathered – and healing them and feeding them – we reconnect with the teachings of the parables. With the vision of the Kingdom of Heaven and what it means for us as Jesus' disciples today.

And we're reminded that, when we respond with our gifts, we will be bearing the fruit of the gospel. That it's our job to grow into the witness that we're called to be, witnesses of the one to whom we belong – constantly growing and bearing fruit. And we're reminded, too, that it's a rough time to be someone who cares about others, to be someone who will stand up for those who are victimized or without power. So, we continue to do what we can to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven here in Bellevue.

We do all of those things when we bring to Jesus what we have to offer. Even when we think it isn't enough, or that it won't make a difference. Because when we do, he takes it and blesses it, and sends us out. And in doing so, he transforms us.

When we act from this place of transformation, we remember the stories the Bible tells us about abundance of the Kingdom of Heaven. We remember that God fed the Israelites manna in the desert. We remember that the widow was able to feed Elijah and her son for much longer than she should have been able to. And we remember the Last Supper.

When we act from this place of transformation, we also act from a place of remembrance of Christ's love and compassion for us. A place of promise and abundance that flows from him, through us, and out into the world.

A friend of mine, who lives in Illinois, was out watering the flowers in her yard the other night. She heard sirens and noticed that it was a little hazy on the next block, and then the haze turned into smoke.

She walked down to ask her neighbors what was going on. There was a woman there that she didn't know, who was crying and her house was on fire. She'd been in the shower and barely had time to throw on some clothes before running out. Her kids were in their jammies, and all of them were barefoot.

My friend said that, within five minutes, one set of neighbors had the kids in complete outfits and others had gone off to get food and bottled water. The mom was in shock, trying to wrap her head around everything that was going on. In that moment, she wasn't able to answer the question, "What do you need?"

But everyone brought stuff anyway. The clothes that the kids got that night were probably hand-me-downs. And the food was probably just stuff that people blindly grabbed from their pantries. They may not think that they gave her all that much, but my guess is that the mom from the burned-out house would say that it was more than enough.

"We have nothing here but fives loaves and two fish." "My kids can spare some clothes." "I have some extra cans of food." "They had cases of bottled water on sale at the store today, and I picked up an extra one."

And Jesus said, "Bring them here to me."

Take. Bless. Break. Give. Jesus' actions with the loaves and fish are the same ones he used for the bread and wine in the Last Supper. A bite of bread and sip of wine or grape juice don't seem like much. But consider how they strengthen and sustain us each time we receive Christ's very real presence through them.

When we offer what we have, Jesus will take it and bless it. As he does, he transforms us and empowers us to go out and bear fruit. To be his witnesses. To bring about the Kingdom of Heaven here and now.

Bringing that about will take more work than any one of us can accomplish in our lifetime. But as Jesus' disciples today, we are called to respond from that place of transformation and abundance, from that place of love and compassion.

It doesn't matter if we think that what we have is enough – or whether we think it's good enough. Jesus will take it and bless it so that it can be given.

Thanks be to God. Amen.