

Counting on Pot Luck  
Ephesians 3:14-21 and John 6:1-14  
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July 26, 2009

The feeding of the five thousand is the only major episode of Jesus' ministry that appears in all four Gospels, until the Passion Narratives at the end of his journey. In all four Gospels the significant details are the same. A crowd gathers to see and hear this man who has been healing sick people. Jesus is concerned that the people have nothing to eat and asks his disciples to find food for them. The disciples are skeptical, but find a boy in the crowd who has five loaves of bread and two fishes and is willing to share them. Jesus blesses the food and the disciples pass it out to the crowd. When the meal is over the disciples collect enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. There is no explanation of how this came about other than Jesus knew what he was going to do.

I think the heart of this story is the possibility that abundance will be there for people who have to count on the help and generosity of others and learn to trust that this is enough. This story is about the power of God to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, as the prayer in Ephesians says.

Only in the last few years have I really needed to count on the aid of other people, especially strangers. With the loss of much of the vision in my left eye I need help at times. Because of this I am discovering a new world of possibilities for abundance and a whole new community.

One of my problems is that I no longer have depth perception. It is especially challenging to go down stairs. When I get to the last step I'm not sure where the floor is. I usually put out my toe and feel around until I know I am on solid ground. I was proud of myself when I figured out how to step off the bus. I grab the yellow bars on the doors, let myself down until I feel the pavement underfoot, then I'm home free to go about my business. This worked until I got off the bus at an unfamiliar stop where there was another small step up before I got to the sidewalk, which I didn't see because I wasn't looking. I got off the bus using the yellow bars, began to walk ahead, tripped on the little step, and felt myself pitching forward and falling through space. But before I hit the ground, two men who were waiting to board the bus reached out and caught me by my arms. They set me back on my feet. A woman who was also waiting to board the bus said, "That didn't take long". And then we all went on our way.

A few weeks ago I was riding the bus and saw a woman about my age who had her own version of using the yellow bars. She was holding on to one of them as she tried to pull herself up on the bus. She tried several times and just didn't seem to have the strength to do it. The bus driver asked her if she wanted him to lower the bus. She said No - and flung the umbrella she was carrying in one hand onto the floor in front of her, took hold of the yellow bars with both hands, and hauled herself up. She said "I should know that this always takes two hands." She wasn't ready to ask for help because she could manage to get herself on the bus, but she was willing to shed her dignity to get where she wanted to go. I count her in the community of people of a certain age who find creative ways to deal with limitations.

As I observe and participate in this community of aging people I have noticed several hallmarks of our behavior. The struggle between independence and dependence is an ongoing battle. I believe that abundance comes to us whichever way we choose to be. I was amazed that the men caught me when I fell off the bus. The woman was obviously delighted that she had thrown down her umbrella to use both hands and successfully get herself on the bus. Humor and loss of dignity go hand in hand with our life style. I like being too old to pay attention to how I look when I'm stumbling around trying to find the bottom of the stairs.

Asking for help is not something that comes easily to people who have been able to be independent most of their lives. Yet a new kind of abundance comes with the asking. I imagine it was not easy for Jean Ervin to ask for help with her and Don's move to Montgomery Place this past week. But she realized that she and Don could not make the move alone. Many of us have had a chance to help out and to show the Ervins our love and gratitude for their friendship and many years of service to University Church. For the last few weeks friends and members of University Church have contributed large and small bits of assistance. This generosity has been multiplied into an apartment made ready for Jean and Don with almost all their boxes unpacked.

Another hallmark of the community of white haired wonders is risk taking. This is a huge challenge for aging people. For one thing, our bones are getting fragile and falling is a serious threat. In summer I often thank God that there is no ice on the sidewalk. There are all kinds of things that pose a risk and we have to decide what to do about them. Deciding to not risk sometimes isn't a very good option because taking the risk may be the way of possible abundance.

Last week in Joys and Concerns Harvey Lord told us he had a joy. He has been considering going to the Disciples of Christ General Assembly in Indianapolis this coming week, which he says might be his last chance to go because of his Parkinson's disease. He has thought long and hard about the physical challenges and risks of taking the trip. He told us that he had tried a new medication that improved his ability to stand. And he put aside his cane and showed us how he could stand on his own. He told us he realized that he has a place at the General Assembly and he is going to be there to take his place.

Ragina Bunton also got up in Joys and Concerns last Sunday and told us of a risk that Irving has decided to take. Irving has never truly regained his health after his heart attack two years ago. Irving's doctor recently told him of an experimental treatment that he thought might help and Irving said Yes he would try it.

Many of you probably remember that I have been seeking creative ways of aging for a while. I began this when I was fifty-five years old and attended a retreat called "Seven Tasks of Creative Aging." I liked the idea of making choices about my aging process, especially the task that said that I no longer had to stomach things I did not want to do and could give them up. Several years ago I gave some workshops here at University Church to see what you thought about creative aging. I no longer think aging is a fun task, but I still believe that God designed the difficult later years of life to have meaning and purpose and that there is goodness to be found in them. I am aware that some people have chronic illness and pain. Many have huge burdens of one kind or another. I don't want to minimize the difficulty of aging. I'm grateful that so far I have only the usual aches and pains of an aging body and am able to get around. I find goodness in identifying with a community of aging people. I even think this community makes up a "Sacred Story" that reveals God's abundant love and care.

Currently Jay Wilcoxon is teaching a course on "The Sacred Histories of Israel and America". Jay offered a definition of Sacred Stories that gave me a framework for thinking about my conviction that there is meaning and purpose in living out our aging years. To paraphrase Jay, a 'sacred' story is one in which the destiny is of divine origin. It is a story in which God is understood to act, at least behind the scenes, to carry forward the destiny of the group. The story may make no explicit reference to God or divine destinies, but it is told in such a way that those who hear it feel the inevitability and rightness of the outcome."

To get back to the story of the loaves and fishes, I think that the sacred story of a community of the aging is about finding abundance when I go out of my door and

have to depend on the goodness of other people. It is about asking for help when I would really rather do things by myself but can't manage alone. It is about risk taking. It is about being vulnerable, looking foolish, being undignified, learning to laugh at myself, finding courage I didn't know I had, and wisdom. It is about finding a community of people who recognize each other in our limitations and determination to get about anyway, as well as we are able. It is about falling down and being picked up. It is about helping one another. It is about counting on the abundance of pot luck to see us through. Thanks be to God.

Amen.