

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all, you call us to discipleship, to strive for the difficult things, to be your witnesses in a world that rejects your ways. We come to this place to be filled with awe of you, to be equipped for the road ahead, and to gather as one community to testify to all these things together in mutual support and service. And as one community, we lift up our individual supplications, of those we praise and those we mourn. Hear all those things we have lifted up here in words and in our hearts, and walk with us throughout them all.

Like the miracle of the bread and fishes so long ago, we believe that what we have to offer is so meager, gracious God. We think that what we can do doesn't matter whatsoever, so we shouldn't even bother. However, you are a God of abundance. Our meager offerings can expand and grow beyond our understanding, just like five loaves and two fish can feed a crowd of five thousand people. Help us, God, to avoid the very human feelings of discouragement at the enormity of a world lacking justice and to simply offer what we have, even if they seem less than five loaves and two fish. We pray all these things in the name of the one who can multiply our gifts and our efforts beyond our imaginations, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to live out the prayer he taught us, saying...

SERMON

Think about the last time you received a hand-written note or an out-of-the-blue phone call. What did it do to you? Did it make you feel legitimately loved? Did it move you to do something or go somewhere? Did it drive you to show further love in response? Personal communication is one of the most powerful means to show each other how much we care. Acts of love as seemingly small and insignificant as those things can multiply; indeed, we often do not know the effects of our actions. Think of how much those acts of

goodness and kindness can do when we do them in God's name! With God's help and in God's time, they can expand beyond our understanding. A loving note or call at the right time can make someone feel better when they are down or, as one of my good friends can attest, a note or call at the right time can literally save someone's life. These things can even change the world we live in, one piece and one day at a time.

Last week, we talked about the complicated but necessary work of justice. It's hard to understand, being so slow to move and so very intangible the idea is, but we recognize how engrained it is in scripture, how Christ preached it, and how we see its need in daily life around the world. Many of you also know what it means to be the victim of injustice, however small. Now we take the next step in putting some justice into action in the name of Jesus Christ. Today I want to share a part of myself. I want to give you the opportunity to partake in something I believe in when we consider how to act as people testifying to and acting for God's justice in a world lacking it. First of all, let me explain Bread for the World's ministry, then we will look at the calling of God from our scriptures today, and finally, we will see how we are being called to serve with these tools.

In the summer of 2008, I applied and was selected by the organization Bread for the World to take part in a conference about hunger advocacy in Washington DC. I met with about a hundred other young people who had a passion to live out this Gospel calling to fight against the scourge of hunger. How many have heard of Bread for the World? It is a non-denominational, non-partisan Christian organization whose mission is clear: we are led by the Gospel message and the actions of Jesus Christ to do all in our power to end world hunger. And we engage in justice work to accomplish that mission. Remember how we talked last week about the difference between charity and justice? Charity is attending

to the immediate needs of those who hunger. Justice tries to eliminate the conditions where people go hungry. Bread for the World falls into the latter. We spent several days discussing what good advocacy is, how we go about speaking truth to those in power, and how we hold them accountable. Then we went into action by speaking directly to our representatives. I talked to several of my Nebraska representatives about our mission, and they were pleased to hear the viewpoint of a constituent. I asked them to enact specific legislation to alleviate hunger here and abroad. This is an act of advocacy. Advocacy is speaking on behalf of those who have no voice, and we do it in Christ's name. We do that mainly through good communication in visiting our representatives, writing hand-written letters, and making phone calls to state our views, among other avenues. However, we do this to hold those who represent us accountable to our desires as constituents who voted for them in the first place. For they, like us, wish to do everything to keep their jobs.

This justice advocacy work is rooted in scripture. Micah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, speaks clearly: Acts of worship are good, but they are not sufficient for a faithful life. We are called to be active in our world as ambassadors for God's loving nature and care for all people. "What does the Lord require of us? Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God." And Jesus puts this scripture into action with a great miracle. Our second scripture lesson is the Feeding of the Five Thousand from the Gospel of Matthew, one of our beloved stories from Christ's ministry. This is a great miracle by Jesus, but let's look at it more deeply in how Jesus carries it out. Jesus and the disciples come to the shore to find a great crowd ready to meet Jesus. The way Jesus sees them is very important: Jesus sees these people with compassion. The disciples do not; they see them as an annoyance. The disciples simply say, "Tell them to go away and go eat

elsewhere, Jesus.” I can see Jesus shaking his head at the disciples’ hardheartedness. “They don’t have to go away,” he says. “You give them something to eat.” He doesn’t say, “Don’t worry, I got this, guys.” He doesn’t say, “Yeah, they should feed themselves.” He says, “You give them something to eat.” The disciples, of course, complain in response. They respond, “Well, we don’t have anything but five loaves and two fish.” Their tone is, “We can’t do it; what we have just isn’t sufficient.” But Jesus does not let them get away from this act of service. He tells them to offer what they have, and only when the disciples offer what they have, the miracle happens. All ate and were filled, and there was plenty left over.

Today, in the spirit of this scripture and the calling by Jesus Christ that we should feed those who are hungry, I offer you a chance to engage in some advocacy of your own. As you have probably seen in your bulletins, there is a handout from Bread for the World. Take some time to read it over and consider what it says prayerfully. It is a note to our President that asks him to more fully engage options in ending hunger here in the United States and abroad. It uses scripture to make the strong case against the problems of hunger. I offer you some options with this. You may sign this note, and we will send them in, or you may take the note as an example and food for thought for writing your own note. We learned in that Bread for the World workshop that the more personalized the communication is, the more effective it is to those who represent us. Indeed, our elected representatives long for the opportunity to hear directly from their constituents how to act on things like this. I heard from many representatives myself, and they testify that a handwritten note is far, far more effective to making them act beyond an email or a form letter. Our personalized, thoughtful communication with them truly works. Maybe we don’t see the effects all at once, but that’s how the work of justice and the work of God go.

We curse the disciples for their hardheartedness, but we see they are very human and have many of the same feelings we have. I know what you may be thinking; I often have the same thoughts myself. How often and easily our minds go to this place of insufficiency, of denial, of futility when we think of how our efforts to end something like hunger can be. Why should I even try when my efforts will not accomplish anything at all? Congress is really corrupt; why deal with them? What if I really don't like the president? Why write about such things to my representatives or the president when they don't care about such things? To an extent, sure, that makes sense in light of the stalemate of our recent government shutdown. You may have differences of politics; you may not like the president or congress. You may think we should have different priorities. Fair enough, but that may be too easy. Others can buy that negativity around the ongoing work of justice but we answer to someone greater who fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish.

When we buy those arguments, we underestimate the power of our Creator. It's unfaithful to let our personal political agendas get in the way of serving our Lord and Creator, when we are Democrat, Republican, or otherwise. God moves as God moves, and God is powerful. We don't serve God on our own clocks. We don't offer service to God to get immediate results. We said that in our first lesson about evangelism: it's just as true then as it is now: "It's not about results." We plant the seeds that God will grow in God's own time. We must think about it in this way: when we offer these thoughts to those in power, when we work in even the smallest ways, we are offering a prayer to God. I know from hearing this congregation that we believe prayer works. I offer you another opportunity to offer prayer. This is another way we can offer prayer and testify to God at the same time. It is, like the widow of last week, putting our prayer out there and to work.

That is the faithful prayer Jesus lauded in that passage, and that is the prayer we have the opportunity to lift up today. The miracle of the loaves and fishes could only happen when we brought to the table what we have to offer to God and God's service. Actually, think about just about every miracle Jesus offers. Jesus asks something of us, and when we offer what we have, the miracle happens.

Just like Jesus, we feel and act in compassion. We are to feel the other's pain as our own and move to soothe it as we can. We are called to see the pains of others and move in loving response. In another way of thinking, we are to see each other as representatives of Jesus Christ and those we serve as Jesus as well. When we see those in need, we are to act as if we are serving Jesus directly. Jesus said in John, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." This has basically been the theme of my year. We live abundantly when we help others live abundantly. This is the calling of justice, a calling that never ends.

You may be hearing all of this and thinking it is futile or that we as Christians should not get involved in the political realm. But this is work done in the name of Jesus Christ. Never, friends, never a good deed done in the name of Jesus Christ done in futility. This is living out the Gospel message in discipleship, and discipleship is about doing, not simply hearing, which we know James preaches about quite clearly. This is the option to set aside all partisan politicking and speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that often does not know that way. I offer you one avenue, but I also offer you the ability to dialogue about this path of service that may require more time and contemplation to engage in. But God works and God can work great wonders and create great bounties when we offer what we have, even if it seems as meager as five loaves and two fish or a handwritten note about the problems of hunger in our world. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.