

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The term Lent comes from an old English word for springtime. The season of Lent is a time for growth in faith- through prayer, spiritual discipline, and self-examination as we journey for forty days with Jesus to the cross and also celebrate his resurrection. In Lent, we are invited to recall what it means to be followers of Jesus each and every day. In the last days of Jesus' life, he sat at a table, sharing the Passover meal with his closest friends; connecting the ancient story of God's liberating power to his own life. After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples began to gather regularly to break bread in his memory and to experience him in their midst. We do the same thing today as we celebrate Holy Communion. But the upper room was not the only time Jesus was at the table or told stories about tables. Jesus tells stories about banquets and goes to a lot of dinner parties. He eats with religious leaders and shady characters. He feeds a hungry crowd and tells his followers to do the same. Over the next seven weeks, we will consider and reflect on some of these table stories as we meet Jesus at the table together. Yes, we'll be having communion together every week through Easter Sunday. Today's gospel story is not actually around a table, but it involves people who are hungry in a food desert being fed in a miraculous way. Before we read, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.** Let's listen to a word from the Lord from Mark's Gospel 6:30-44.

How do you feel about miracles? Maybe you've experienced or witnessed a miracle in your lifetime, or perhaps you haven't, and your personal life experiences have led to not believing in miracles. We may struggle with questions about the miracles we hear about in the Bible. After all, it makes more sense to think that things are only what they seem: water stays water, five loaves stay five

loaves, and the dead remain dead. There are, in fact, rational explanations for what "really" happened at the feeding of the 5,000. Some explain Jesus feeding the 5,000 as a wilderness potluck where everyone felt so compelled to be good people after hearing Jesus' words that they all opened up their picnic baskets and gave parts of their food to their neighbors, and that's why there was enough food to go around.

But hear me out.... Not that thousands of human beings sharing with their neighbors isn't miraculous; it is, it's just that there are six accounts of this miracle in the gospels. Six, and let's remember that there are only four gospels. That means that a version of this story was told twice in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. So, maybe it's just too important a story to be about people sharing their dinner?! Perhaps this really is a story about God doing what we cannot do. Like the disciples, we, too, make the mistake of not always realizing that we have a God who can feed so many with so little. A God who created the universe out of nothing, put flesh on dry bones, and brought life where it seemed impossible. As it turns out, "nothing" might be God's favorite material to work with. It reminds us that our rock bottom moments can be a beautiful canvas for a new beginning with God's help. Maybe the mistake the disciples made wasn't only that they forgot how God works but also that they, too, were a part of the hungry crowd. A crowd that is not just hungry for food but also famished for hope, purpose, forgiveness, and love. Perhaps these were the primary reasons that drew each person to this deserted place to hear Jesus on this day. Perhaps reasons that drew each of us here today?!

The disciples and all those present for this miracle learned that there was more available to them than what they could scrounge for themselves, not only in food but also in terms of hope, purpose, forgiveness, and love. They learned about God's economy, which is one of abundance. There is ENOUGH in God's economy. There is always more hope, more purpose, more forgiveness, and more love. What about food, though? Amanda grew up in a church that held an annual Shrimp Fry Fundraiser in the community. It's quite the production. Tickets are sold ahead of time and at the door, and the shrimp is shipped in from the South Carolina coast the night before. One year, she remembers that they would run out of shrimp before their advertised closing time, and they halfway jokingly asked if their pastor could bless the shrimp that they had left in hopes that it would multiply to feed the multitude still in the line. She prayed, looked to see what other resources they had available, and found plenty of frozen chicken from a recent church dinner. We finished the night serving fried chicken instead of fried shrimp, and everyone left with full hearts and full stomachs. At the Rescue Mission, the chefs there have no idea what meals they will have even the day of. David Hanna tells of a story where they had a shipment of spaghetti sauce, and the chef was wishing they had some fresh basil and garlic to make it extra flavorful. They were encouraged to pray about it and did. That afternoon the doorbell rang, and it was a person bringing fresh basil from their garden along with some garlic.

These stories are glimpses of God's Kingdom, but we still live in a broken world. There are people who are hungry today; maybe it's you, or perhaps it's the person

next to you. If you are here and hungry in any way today, please join us for lunch immediately after our service and talk with us about what you're experiencing.

Still, others are not here with us today and are food insecure. According to the USDA, more than 34 million people, including 9 million children, in the United States are food insecure. America's hunger crisis is not due to a lack of food production or scarcity in the food supply. No. Hunger and food insecurity in the United States are symptoms of policy choices and an economic system that prioritizes the needs of corporations and the wealthy over those of the general population. In short, they put profit over people. Across the nation, households experience hunger due to a combination of factors, including limited income from jobs that pay less than living wages and discrimination based on race, gender, and disability, let alone inflation. These things that prevent the hungry from being fed are not a picture of God's economy of abundance, yet God's economy of abundance still exists. God's economy of abundance is a part of God's Kingdom of equality, which Jesus brought to the earth, but it hasn't been brought to full fruition yet. That will happen when Christ returns and eradicates discord and hunger. Until then, the Kingdom of God is already here in glimpses and is expanded here on earth by the Body of Christ, the Church, made up of people like you and me: imperfect, living examples of followers of Jesus Christ. That means that we're called to live in the abundance of hope, purpose, forgiveness, and love that we receive in and through Jesus. And from that abundance and overflow, we advocate and help provide for those who do not have access to the abundance of tangible resources in our community, country, and world due to systems prioritizing profit over people.

Modern-day miracles are all around us, and they are mysterious and sometimes aren't in the ways that we expect them to happen, and we don't understand the timing, yet they do exist. They often come in the form of the Body of Christ coming together around loving our neighbors and advocating for changes that serve "the least of these." One example is a Baptist minister named Chris Battle in Knoxville, TN. I met him at the Clergy Conference for justice ministries in Florida a few weeks ago. He is a part of Knoxville's justice ministry- like GOAL here. Rev. Battle invited his small congregation to look around and see the lack of food in their neighborhood. They looked, but they didn't know what to do. But Rev. Battle knew that he liked to garden, and he began doing by digging in the dirt and planting vegetables and giving them away. Before he knew it, people were coming to help. Though they weren't coming to church; they came to the garden. Then he was given some more land to tend and before he knew it; he left the church he was serving to start a farm and to his surprise, a community of faith. Battlefield Farm & Gardens is such a community where the parishioners help with the 50 raised beds of kale and eggplant, string beans and squash, tomatoes and greens, the chicken coop and the compost pile. There on the farm, not only can people come and purchase fresh produce in an otherwise food desert, but they can also come to know Jesus in a very non-judgmental way. Rev. Battle says, "People, when they come to the garden, they'll have conversations with you. But you tell 'em you're a pastor, and the conversation changes. They hide their liquor. They quit cussin'. I mean, everything changes. But on the farm, people are real, and they realize that when we come together, there is enough for everyone" ([story](#)). Look at Loaves and Fishes and Village Farms and other great food sharing ministries and partner organizations here in Greenville!

As we get closer to the Nehemiah Action on March 28th, GOAL, Greenville Organized for Accountable Leadership, is focused on sharing God's ethic of abundance in declaring that everybody deserves a truly affordable roof over their head. Everyone deserves a safe, joyful, and affordable place to lay their head, regardless of race, class, or age. Additionally, we are concentrating on more abundant and affordable access to mental healthcare for all people. This is a vision of God's ethic of abundance, and we're optimistic because God is in it. Yes, we can be optimistic in the broken world that we live in because we carry a different ethic: one of abundance and not of scarcity. A Kingdom ethic that abounds with hope, purpose, forgiveness, and love. A Kingdom ethic that loves our neighbors out of our abundance and overflow of love we have for and receive from God. Loving our neighbors from that abundance means we advocate for those restricted from the abundance of tangible, life-giving resources that we have in our communities, our country, and our world by powers prioritizing profit over people. Yes, miracles happen every day, and Christ is on the move. So let us follow him, as he meets us at the table. Thanks be to God! Amen.