



NOW, THAT'S A SPREAD!

In Luke's Book of Acts, we read, "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people." It was Kum Ba Yah on steroids, communism at its finest, as these people waited on a return that would not happen in their lifetime.

One of the goals of the United Church of Christ for its congregations is to inspire generosity in the hearts and minds of congregants across the denomination. In an article titled, "Burning Heart, Generous Spirit: Mission, Identity, and Stewardship," former Global Ministries/Wider Church Ministries board member, Eleazar S. Fernandez, introduces the subject by employing images of the heart as a metaphor for his thesis because the heart signifies the center, the core of any system, especially and particularly family systems of congregational substance. And, since my heart has been thoroughly examined and found to be ticking well, the heart has certainly been on my mind in recent days! Not to mention my head! But, I digress; I often do . . . probably even more so now! Fernandez addresses what I would call the apathy raging in mainline Protestantism, the crisis that confronts

so many mainline churches, best or perhaps worst and most painfully illustrated in the loss of members and money, poignantly proven in lower attendance and overall participation. He quotes Stanley Hauerwas in a *Newsweek* article, who declared, “God is killing mainline Protestantism in America.” As my patron saint John Shelby Spong has noted, “The church will die of boredom long before it dies of controversy.” And, boredom is at the heart of much of our stubborn traditionalism as we fight the realities of a postmodern 21st century world. Critically thinking, intellectually curious people do not care about our dogmas or creeds, to even lesser degree our level of orthodoxy or any modicum of biblical fidelity, rendering these now ancient priorities outdated and irrelevant to their reality and their concerns. Rather than our veracity about things they generally regard as trivialities, their care and concern is more about whether or not we seek to make a difference in the world, our mission and ministry, and the way we go about engaging and embracing an ever expanding eclectic and pluralistic global village. Churches and denominations characterized by narrow minded sectarian bigoted stereotypes, heavily flavored with personal biases and public prejudices will eventually and inevitably fail, thankfully becoming extinct, going the way of the dinosaur because no variety of social injustice will ever prevail, even if it is subtly and subversively wrapped in pompously pious religious platitudes designed to shore up and uphold the tradition of the Church, the faith of the Fathers. I am still taken aback, shocked and dismayed that it disturbs some self-righteous, judgmental people, offending their sensibilities, at the baseline idea, the Sunday School lesson that “God

is love,” a profoundly biblical principle of the most basic theologically sound substance, that some are put off by the notion that God loves everybody and crafted each human being according to their preconceived orientations, fully embodying the divine image of their creator, not born in sin, but in blessing. **Tackling head-on the storms raging across denominational lines and among numerous churches of all stripes, very real, tangible congregational crises effecting all ecclesial perspectives, Fernandez opines, “Burning hearts for the mission of the church: That is what we want our congregations to be.” He sees that as the ultimate challenge, adding, “It seems to me that the first step in our efforts to develop congregations with burning hearts and generous spirit is to question the very reason for the existence of the church, or the very reason for the existence of our congregation. Do we have any reason for being other than the fact that we have always been here and our church members feel at home? If there is none,” he adds, “then we do not really have purpose other than continuance or survival. If this is the case, why not close our doors?”**

Fernandez then breaks it down with crystal clarity to its most explicitly least common denominator. He says plainly and succinctly, “Mission, in the way I understand it, is not so much about what the church does, whether overseas or within our neighborhood, but the church’s understanding of who it is and what it is called to be. . . Ministry flows from the church’s understanding of mission or reason for being. It seeks to embody the mission. To put it differently, ministry

is the incarnation of mission. Ministry turns mission into flesh and blood. In this manner, ministry is not a separate activity apart from mission (and vice versa); rather ministry is missional. All ministries of the church must be carried out in the spirit of mission and of its mission. Hence, we must speak of missional ministries. . . Without a powerful narrative that defines its daily life, there is no doubt that a congregation is going to be swallowed by the world. A church with a burning heart is possible only when it has a strong narrative identity. Narrative is formative of a congregation's life and identity." It is rooted in self-perception, reinforced with every new person who enters our doors as their stories become part of our stories. As Fernandez notes, individually and collectively, "The yarns that make up the dense and colorful fabric of congregational narrative." He asks, "Who are we? What are we? And what are we called to be and to do? . . . What is the main narrative that is forming our [communal] lives? The church must recover its own narrative, for it is a community defined by a unique narrative. This narrative is not only a guide for its life; it is also a form of witness to the world" (Taken from the website of the United Church of Christ).

In today's Witness from the Gospels in the Book of Matthew we read one of six versions of the feeding of the multitudes dispersed throughout all four of the Gospel narratives. The mythology surrounding mass feedings in the ancient world was a clear indicator of the primacy and importance of this genre of story. This oft repeated

narrative in the Gospels is a reminder that Jesus truly was a special individual, a renowned teacher, revered as a Rabbi placed squarely in the tradition of the law and the prophets of old. These multiple feeding narratives call to mind, Moses' manna in the wilderness, the writers intentionally linking the two. Jesus certainly knew how to throw a spread, ringing the dinner bell of the present and future realm of God in his presence. Once again, let me declare unequivocally and without hesitation or reservation, with crystal clarity and conviction that a literalization of these amazing stories kills their spirit and destroys any hope of gleaning their original meaning, much less gaining any new perspective hidden, though surely lurking within them. As Spong reminds us all, using a takeoff from the title of his recent epic commentary on Matthew, "biblical literalism is a gentile heresy!" The question that I want us to consider, in light of our pondering the hope of gratitude welling from our abundance that is our most fortunate and assumed, believed to be blessed way of life is simply this, "What can the innocence and trusting nature of a child, who chose on a certain day a long time ago to imitate Jesus, acting like the master in every way imaginable, putting to work his words, teach us about inspiring generosity in what was a very survivalist and selfishly self-serving world dominated by scarcity, often driven by the lack of basic necessities?" Surprisingly, even shockingly perhaps, I want us not to focus on Jesus in these homiletical moments together this morning, but rather I would like for us to concentrate on the child who is at the

center, perhaps even the main character of this narrative, considering our perceived perspective on his experience in this wonderful story, a little boy who ironically and unfortunately is omitted, completely missing from today's encounter with Matthew's version of this mass feeding. Taking a text way out of context, I am reminded of the phrase in Isaiah (11:6) describing all the animals that normally would be at each other's throats, "And, a little child will lead them!" The five loaves and two fish may have been blessed from above, but we know for certain that they did not drop down out of the sky like the mythical manna from heaven, which by the way, did not come from that location either!

As with many biblical stories, especially those related to Jesus, when we benignly embrace the typical or traditional rendering of this miracle story in any of its varied forms, we really have nowhere to go with it. Jesus becomes a benevolent figure who, in the immortal words of the song, "walks with us and talks with us," meeting all our needs, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual, as they arise. While it may give us a whole lot of comfort, we know based on our experiences that Jesus' presence will not remove the slings or the arrows of much of our outrageous fortunes. He is not a divine rescuer, providing personal or public immunity, shielding, sheltering, or saving us from life's painful realities! The miracle in this text is not that Jesus magically transformed a mere five loaves and two fishes into a feast for thousands, mesmerizing his audience with his uncanny, supernatural abilities. No, the real miracle at work in this story is

profoundly located in Jesus' amazing ability to move people to action, to compel them, even with a sense of urgency to respond with care and compassion, to literally will individuals to "practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty in a WWJD (What would Jesus do?) kind of way, in other words, to inspire generosity in all its myriad forms." Jesus had the ability to motivate a people whose lives dictated by necessity their need to hoard, to protect at all cost their hard-earned possessions.

I can hear this little boy's mother or father as they prepared to go and listen and learn from the master, "Don't let anyone see your lunch because they might try and take it away from you. Guard it with your life because "they" will steal you blind. Trust no one! Oh, the irony of it all! Treat it as if it were 'coin of the realm.'" Was that not the warning that many of us were given as children regarding our lunch money? Protect it at all cost! If you lose it you will go hungry, you will do without, you will have to go without for the day. So, with his parents' stern warnings echoing in his head, no doubt causing him a distressingly agonizing obsession as he contemplates Jesus' musings unfolding before him, the little boy sits among those about whom he had been strictly warned, thieves in waiting who would take his stuff, and yet, somehow he is able to drown out the cacophony of those distrusting, disturbing, dissonant parental voices, and still manages to hear an alternative, clearly articulated, well-spoken, a most liberating, self-deprecating, inspiring and inspiriting word, still able to hear a

word of self-sharing and sacrifice unlike any word he had ever heard before, even the trustworthy words of his parents, in whom he put his ultimate faith, trust beyond all degree. Perhaps a child could do that which no adult present could even comprehend, much less complete! “Suffer not the children to come,” Jesus implores elsewhere in the Gospel narrative. The more the child hears the more he is moved, inspired, and transformed by Jesus’ refreshing and reforming ideas, his radical revelations. This child quickly realizes that there is something in the clarity of Jesus’ generosity-inspiring words that transcend time and space, allowing the hearer to escape the confining gravity of all life’s realities, circumstances, and situations of uncontrollable challenge, including even the most miserable state of current affairs confronting Jesus’ audience.

The gravity of the circumstances of this situation was that all these people have come out to hear the great prophetic preacher and now they hunger in their stomachs as much, if not more than in their heads and their hearts. The hungrier they got physically the less they could absorb from one who was able with linguistic magnitude to transform the old, old story of the religious tradition of all their births into a radical new message of generosity revealed and wrapped in unbridled, unfettered welcome and inclusion revealed in unbound and unlimited hospitality. It was the same message, but different, and all at the same time! The disciples’ solution was the path of least

resistance, the lazy solution, an easy way out of the dilemma, as they chose the poorest option, the least common denominator of a most pedestrian and timidly convenient, expeditious variety. Send this ravenous crowd away so they can go back from whence they came that they might find something to eat. Perhaps foolishly, Jesus dares suggests to them that, "You feed them!" What was he thinking? We can just picture their stunned amazement at the prospect! Makes good sense, common sense! Problem solved! Come on guys; throw some caution to the wind! Be bold! Take some initiative! Step out of your box, beyond the boundaries of your narrow and life-sucking limitations! Cross that line in the sand that determines your role in life's celebration! Color outside your lines of demarcations that prevent your participation in the common good! Life is a party and everyone is invited!

By then, no doubt, Jesus' clarion call reminding his hearers that we human beings are at our best when we become human doings, when we find ways to step out of ourselves and give of ourselves. Surely that was resonating among many of those assembled, but obviously with one boy in particular. Reluctantly, cautiously, or perhaps boldly and proudly, with conviction, the little boy generously reveals his treasure, a couple of fish and five little loaves of bread, hardly enough to feed a growing boy, much less a multitude of hungry mouths. Out of embarrassment or even shame, he could have easily hidden his small

treasure from all to see, thinking it trivial and inadequate, a most unworthy an insignificant offering. “Surely, it is not enough. It will not make a difference.” Ah, the beauty and innocence, the imagination and wonderful naiveté of a child. In the twinkling of an eye, suddenly food was appearing from every corner of the crowd, popping up from everywhere, so much so that everyone had plenty to eat, including those foolish enough to not prepare for the long day, failing to bring provisions to this sudden, impromptu party. When all was said and done there was food to spare, even enough for Jesus’ boys, his disciples, to have something for later. The miracle in this story is not the waving of a magic wand to create this 1st century version of “Dinner on the Ground”, but was in the ability of a teacher to inspire and a child to conspire, the two of them conceiving and scheming, probably not even aware of one another’s intentions, a delightfully spontaneous, serendipitous tandem producing an elaborate feast of microwavable immediacy, an on-the-spot harvest filling the stomachs of a great untold multitude.

If we buy into a magic act, a magic trick performed by a magician, then the story comes to a grinding, screeching halt right there in its tracks, a moment in time bound by the history of the moment. If we literalize this story, reducing it to a one-dimensional realized historical moment in time, then the story has boringly and routinely accomplished its proprietary purpose, making Jesus a man of unreachable, un-relatable

proportions, a man of mystery and intrigue wrapped in an enigma, a magician and miracle worker who is far removed, very detached from the world that surrounded him, not to mention even remotely capable of relating to our complex contemporary reality. That alone removes all possibility, all potential for any altruistic or benevolent response from any one of us mere mortal types. The text is reduced to ask and answer. We can all read it and reply, “Wasn’t that nice? Isn’t that special?” The real questions, in all honesty, could be “So, what?” “Now, what?” A face value approach to this narrative, lacking curiosity and imagination, and an analytically inquisitive mind, gives us nowhere else to go because the text serves no further purpose other than merely providing self-evident commentary describing the person of Jesus. As with all parts of the Bible, you have to look for the contextual nuance, simultaneously reading between the lines. You need to be willing to playfully interact with the text, engaging it honestly while not fearfully handling it as if with kid gloves. Sometimes that demands the willingness to put aside affections and critically examine it, to put it to the test, expose it to the rigors, treating it, if only briefly, like any other good literature, rather than as holy writ or the ominous, even dreadful “Word of the Lord!” A literal rendering or surface reading calls forth nothing spectacular or even simplistic from any of us because it fails to engage the breadth and depth of the text. On our best days and in our wildest dreams, we certainly could never even begin to replicate something of such impossible magnitude if we naively think we are supposed to perfectly copy, to fully emulate and embody Jesus’ abilities, actions, or

attitudes. But, if we consider the possibility that a little boy heard a word so radical, so transformational, so miraculously and stunningly amazing that he dared to risk sharing of his personal provisions, pulling out his private stash, all the food that he had, all that was his, and offered it freely with no guarantee that any of these loaves and fish cast upon the waters were coming back his way, then we too can enter the realm of possibility and potential that is ours for the taking if we so desire it. The little boy had no crystal ball and knew not even the immediate future unfolding before his very eyes and the eyes of all now fixated on his small, but generous offering. Now folks, that is a true miracle because it involves the rest of us, the likes of you and me, asking for us to be active in our world. We all know Jesus' capacity, what he is capable of doing, his seemingly effortless, what appears in every way to be a seamless and routine consistency in every scenario he encounters, or at least the ones to which we are privy. There is really nothing new under the sun with Jesus. Many have spent a lifetime learning of him and his way. We know his shtick rather well! Jesus is our model, our exacting standard, the gold, no, make that the platinum or palladium standard, the plumb-line by which we make behavioral comparisons, the specifications by which we measure ourselves and our actions, both individually and corporately as beloved faith community. Giving ourselves a much-needed break and cutting ourselves some slack is a requirement; however, because we always must remember, to use some popular vocabulary, Jesus was a freak, a freak of nature with super human, superhero qualities, apparently perfectly tuned to the presence of God in

every aspect of his life, of his very being, even to the point that there appeared to be no degree of separation from the man and his Abba, the God he knew intimately as heavenly parent. We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that our perspective about Jesus' life is steeply slanted in terms of how we continue to regard him and who we believe him to have been, which unfortunately only adds to the mythology, even furthering his other worldly like qualities. We would add that he possessed unique qualities, characteristics unlike any before or after him. His body of work reveals an unreal or surreal reality, despite his being a very real flesh and blood human being! **You see, these are the variables in this and all of life's dramas. We reflect the inconsistencies often defining our humanity, the great unknowns about all our beings and doings each and every time we are faced with a circumstance, a situation that calls forth from us a decision, a choice to be made. All bets are off when it comes to us humans and our humanity! Therein lies the uncommon denominator, the hook to not only this story, but to all our stories! What will we do when opportunity comes knocking at our doorstep?**

Fernandez ends his discussion about generosity by reminding us all, "The challenge of developing congregations with a burning heart and a generous spirit for the mission of the church is bigger than our lives. If it were not, then it is really not worth giving our whole lives. It is easy to lose heart in the face of enormous challenge. Let us not forget, however, that our mission is God's very own mission and, to use a line

from African-American church tradition, 'God ain't finished with us yet.' God is listening and, of course, 'God is still speaking.' God is speaking in and to our hearts." He concludes, "My people, do not lose heart. As in the days of old, I will pour my Spirit in your midst and your congregations will live with burning hearts for the mission of the church. And out of these burning hearts will flow radical gratitude, extravagant hospitality, and overflowing generosity.'" Therein is the hope, the saving grace for the Church, our church!

We have a message of mission and ministry to share as the SouthShore United Church of Christ. Do not be fooled. It is a far different narrative based on a far different identity than the one being preached and proclaimed by many locally and beyond. In case I have not connected the dots well enough today, our generosity is directly born out of our abundance, hardwired to who and what we believe as a welcoming, hospitable, and inclusive beloved faith community. Fernandez' article nails it! Our generosity is born out of our identity, our uniquely defined narrative, our ethos; our identity is born out of our theology; our theology is born out of our basic understanding that God is the essence of love, that God loves everybody; our ecclesiology is born out of our theology, that love compels us, calling forth from within our being our gratitude and generosity, our openness, our welcome and inclusion of everyone, the affirmation of all persons. They are inseparable! So, may your hearts continue to burn with a generous

spirit, expansively and extravagantly welcoming everyone, “No matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey.” May this Table of abundance, a real heavenly spread, reflect the generosity of a little boy, who once upon a time in a moment in time made a difference in a quick decision, choosing goodness and grace in spite of greatest odds, the slimmest and slightest chance, as he gave of himself and his precious stuff, feeding a multitude in a miraculous moment, leaving a great legacy for the rest of us, everyone who would strive to emulate his courageous gift, daring to even remotely come close to following in his outrageously boldly guiding footsteps even as we attempt to follow Jesus, the one who once inspired generosity in a child and does likewise with the likes of us. May this be a metaphor for all of us living these days together as beloved faith community. “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.” Who knows? Perhaps a little boy was responsible for inspiring a generous future for every disciple who would follow, filling them with a hopeful gratitude defining the Church in every age to come.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and inspires spontaneous and serendipitous generosity in our midst. Amen and amen.

Timothy W. Shirley
SouthShore United Church of Christ
Sun City Center, Florida 33573
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