

“How Much Does it Take?”

Pentecost 9; Matthew 13:31-33, 14:13-21

August 2, 2020; 9:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

PRAYER

God of wisdom and insight,
May the words that I speak, and the ways
they are received by each of our hearts
and minds, help us continue to grow into
the people, and the church, that you
have dreamed us to be. Amen.

Matthew 13:31-33 (The Voice)

Jesus told them another parable. Jesus: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a sower took and planted in his field. Mustard seeds are minute, tiny—but the seeds grow into trees. Flocks of birds can come and build their nests in the branches. And Jesus told a *fourth* parable. Jesus: *Imagine a woman preparing a loaf of bread.* The kingdom of heaven is like the leaven she folds into her dough. She kneads and kneads until the leaven is worked into all the dough.

Matthew 14:13-21 When Jesus learned what had happened, He got on a boat and went away to spend some time in a private place. The crowds, of course, followed Jesus on foot from their cities. *Though Jesus wanted solitude*, when He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, and He healed the sick *and the lame*. At evening-time, Jesus' disciples came to Him.

Disciples: We're in a fairly remote place, and it is getting late; *the crowds will get hungry for supper*. Send them away so they have time to get back to the villages and get something to eat.

Jesus: They don't need to go back to the villages in order to eat supper. Give them something to eat here.

Disciples: *But we don't have enough food.* We only have five rounds of *flatbread* and two fish.

Jesus: Bring the bread and the fish to Me.

So the disciples brought Him the five rounds of flatbread and the two fish, and Jesus told the people to sit down on the grass. He took the bread and the fish, He looked up to heaven, He gave thanks, and then He broke the bread. Jesus gave the bread to the disciples, and the disciples gave the bread to the people; everyone ate and was satisfied. *When everyone had eaten*, the disciples picked up 12 baskets of *crusts and broken pieces of bread and crumbs*. There were 5,000 men there, not to mention all the women and children.

I. A THEME HERE!

There's a radio station in the Denver area that runs a program every afternoon called "My 3 Songs." I used to love to listen and puzzle over this "quiz game" when I lived and worked there. It was a good distraction from the endless congestion and navigating of southwest-side traffic.

The DJ would play 3 songs in a row, and the trick was to figure out what on earth they had in common. What thread or theme ran through all 3 songs? It might be something in the title, the subject, an image portrayed. Or it might be something really obscure, like the composers all went to band camp together in the 1960's!

Listeners would then call in and IF they were the first to call in with the correct answer of what the three songs had in common, they would get a fabulous prize! I don't think I ever guessed it. Not well enough or quickly enough to call-in while driving, anyway! (Nor did I have Rocky with me at that time of day to help.)

Our scripture selection this morning could be made into a puzzle game like that. (Sorry, I don't have any fabulous prizes on hand, but you could drop a comment in the chat bar on You Tube or let us know you "guessed it" at Coffee Hour today! Better yet—tell us when you come to get your Drive-By Cookies on Tuesday! 4-6 pm at CUCC. Cookies of Caring.)

In the four stories, little scripture vignettes, that Merilee read for us, there's a **theme**—a thread that runs throughout. My four stories:

- *The mustard seed of faith
- *A woman baking bread with yeast
- *Jesus needing a time-out. A nap. A rest in the boat on a busy afternoon.
- *Jesus feeding the multitudes on the hillside.

II. HOW MUCH FAITH DO YOU HAVE?

How much *faith* do you have?

How much faith and hope, do you think you need?

These days, especially.

How big of a seed do you need to plant, in order for a crop to grow?

How tiny of a seed can create an invasion?

A noxious infestation of a weed that can wreak havoc on a place?

(PSA: If you haven't watched Susan Thistlethwaite's sermon yet, in the Rocky Mountain Conference Worship from last Sunday, do it soon! Mustard seeds of faith might not be what we've always thought. Not quite how we imagined!)

How much leaven, yeast, does it *take* to work through a loaf? Or an entire community—to work for good—to

start, encourage, tend and produce life and ongoing nourishment for bodies and souls?

How much *time* does Jesus get for his power nap in the boat? Not a lot. The needs of the crowds are just so great that they don't leave him alone for long. But! It is *enough*.

Jesus only gets a *little* solitude. Like when we grab a quick "breathing break" on a busy day. Or a short power nap. Also like Jesus, we can find ourselves refreshed by the pause. We *can* renew our spirits and energy and get back to the work Christ calls us to.

And then, Jesus feeds them. WITH God's abundance—not on his own power and energy—but as a channel of the loving power and constant care of the Creator. THOUSANDS of them! With how *much* food? Five pieces of flatbread and two fish!

How much faith do we have? How much do we need?

FAITH & DOUBT:

"Some days I am not sure if my faith is riddled with doubt, or whether, graciously, my doubt is riddled with faith. And yet I continue to live in a world the way a religious person lives in the world; I keep living in a world that I know to be enchanted, and not left alone. I doubt; I am uncertain; I am restless, prone to wander. And yet glimmers of holy keep interrupting my gaze."

— Lauren F. Winner, Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis

III. SUITCASE OF SEEDS!

A book has been making a splash lately—on the New York Times bestseller list and other places, called *The*

Noticer, by Andy Andrews. It's a story about a mysterious man named, simply, "Jones."

No first name, and no residential address. He floats around a small town in America. A simple town, filled with simple people. But, their lives are *not* simple—any more than any other lives in big or small towns.

They all have their share of problems—marriages teetering on the brink of divorce, young adults giving up on life, business people on the verge of bankruptcy, and many other obstacles that life seems to dish out. And, the people struggle to “dish it back” to the challenges they face.

And, over and over again, when things look the darkest, this mysterious old man named Jones shows up. He has an almost *miraculous* way of showing up—just at the right place, and in the right time. Jones has a unique character about him—kind of a Messiah figure—like Jesus in many ways. Some might call his demeanor “angelic-like.” (Reading about Jones definitely reminded me of that TV show of yesteryear that my parents absolutely *loved* and watched religiously, “Touched By An Angel!”)

Jones appears at the pivotal moment when perspective is hard to find, and offers little seeds – little “gifts of perspective.” Wise insights. Unsolicited, but spot-on advice.

Jones explains as he goes around and interacts with folks, that he has “been given a gift of *noticing* things about life that others miss.” In his simple interactions, he speaks to that part in everyone that is yearning to

understand *why* things happen and what they can do about it.

Folks in the small town gather together often to share the stories. How he just *appeared* at the right time—always with an old, battered, kind of decrepit **suitcase** in hand—and he helped them.

He talked them out of taking harmful paths, steered them in a new direction, opened their eyes to seeing the hope and promise in a situation or relationship when all *they* saw was desperation and a dead-end.

At the end of the story, the *suitcase* appears in the parking lot of the Pak-Mail shop, but Jones is nowhere to be found. And he is, in fact, *never* found or seen again—in the flesh.

As folks are almost mysteriously drawn to town that day, gathering around the suitcase and telling stories of how Jones made a difference in their lives, someone finally gets up the courage to *open* it.

It is opened by one person, as the crowd watches with baited breath. But, they are soon disappointed, as an ordinary paper package of seeds appears—no bigger than a playing card—like you've seen a million times in the garden center. Marigold seeds.

But then, someone bumps the table where the suitcase is sitting, and two *more* packages—just like the first—slide out. But these hold tomato seeds. And snapdragon seeds.

This is getting more interesting by the minute! So, the collective decision is made to open up the whole darned suitcase.

“When the top half of the battered old suitcase began to rise and pull away from the bottom half, it was apparent that there was no divider inside the ancient luggage.

Seeds—brightly colored paper packages of seeds—fell everywhere.

“They filled the bottom half of the suitcase to overflowing, but the packages that had been stuffed into the top half fell onto the table, across the table, and onto the floor.

“Squash. Daisy. Cucumber. Forget-me-nots. Oleander. Heather. Zinnias. Okra. Watermelon. Turnip. Black-eyed Susan. Lilies. Geraniums. Pumpkin. Iris. Bellflower. And cantaloupe. Several hundred packages—as many as the suitcase could hold—and who knew how many varieties!”

Underneath all the packages was one more **mystery**: a small, white envelope with a folded piece of paper inside. A note from “him.”

My dear friends,

For so long now I have been among you and cared for each of you more than you could possibly know. Many times, even when you did not see me or sense my presence, I was there – watching closely and listening carefully.

Your time on this earth is a gift to be used wisely. Don't squander your words or your thoughts. Consider that even the simplest actions you take for your lives matter beyond measure...and they matter forever.

I do not believe that you will see me again, here, in this place, but trust that the seeds I have planted in your minds and hearts will be sufficient to carry you forward. These are the seeds of

perspective. During the challenging times ahead, you will find that simple seed of perspective more valuable than diamonds or gold.

In desperate time, much more than anything else, folks need perspective. For perspective brings calm, calm leads to clear thinking. Clear thinking yields new ideas. And ideas produce the blood – of an answer. Keep your head and heart clear. Perspective can just as easily be lost as it can be found.

I have left these seeds for you as a simple reminder that you must also plant your own seeds in the minds and hearts of those you touch. You will honor my memory with your work.

I am not gone. I will be around. The best is yet to come.

Jones (*The Noticer*. By Andy Andrews)

IV. HOW MUCH DOES IT TAKE?

Seeds. Noticing. Mindfulness of what and who are around us. Scattering seeds, planting ideas, giving the gift of our insights, understanding, new perspectives.

Seeds. Seemingly so tiny, yet what can grow from them, if planted in fertile soil and minds, tended, watered and allowed to thrive and flourish?

Jesus feeds the multitude with 5 pieces of flatbread and 2 fish. Not on his own power, but in trusting the power of God, the Creator, to make abundant what *looks* to be scarce. To take our cries of scarcity – “Master! Send them away. We haven't begun to have enough food for them all!”

And Jesus reminds us that we do, in fact, already have everything we need. Inside us. Within us. Among us.

To be shared *freely*, with open hands, not clinching tightly as if there is NOT enough to go around.

Scattered seeds –no matter how tiny—will fall on fertile soil when we work *with* the Maker of us all. When we come together, One in the Spirit, united in the Body of Christ, for the good of all. For the sharing of love, hope and faith –which never runs out – a cup overflowing –like the skies have been overflowing this week!

Even crumbs. A different kind of seeds of sorts. I love the end of this feeding of the 5000 story:
When everyone had eaten, the disciples picked up 12 baskets of crusts and broken pieces of bread and crumbs.

Crumbs. Leftovers. They may not seem like much. Sometimes we feel like we're "running on crumbs" – like "running on fumes" when we're about to run out of gas—either in our vehicles, or our bodies and spirits.

But, God is not limited by the form of the fuel. Just as tiny mustard seeds of faith can do huge things—if they are not allowed to be noxious weeds and shut-out everything and everyone else around them—so are crumbs—left in the baskets after all are fed and gathered up. Hopefully, those disciples took those baskets of crumbs off of the mountainside and straight to the Ark-Valley Mission—to be shared—or at least home to the birds!

Seeds. Crumbs. Crusts. Little fish. A kind word. A card. A phone call on a lonely day. A song or text to say 'I love you.' An encouraging word.

How much does it take? To build up the Body? To love our neighbor far and near?

We plant seeds every time we open our minds and hearts to a new way of looking at things. To understanding another's journey that is different from ours—maybe they're a different race or socio-economic background; maybe a different sexual orientation or gender expression from us. We struggle to get our minds around these differences, but every time we even *try*, we plant seeds of a wondrous and beautiful hope for greater understanding among God's children.

A friend in BV shared that she is literally planting a tree today—as a way to remind them every day of the promise of new life and love all around. To tend and care for "ourselves, our family, our home. Our neighbor. A place for the birds to come and nest and rest in its branches.

Hmm.....is that a sign of the Kingdom? Planting subversive love like Jesus urged? A re-imagined noxious weed, invading our community? Reminding us to continue to puzzle over Jesus' call to us—not all neat and tidy and comfortable—but a challenge, act of resistance to the status quo. A declaration that we live and move and have our being in God's kingdom and Jesus' path—the path of subversive love for *all*—not the kingdom of this world.

How much does it take? Not so very much, when the seeds are sown with the love of God in Christ. When we choose the right kind of life-giving seeds; choose to BE the loving kind. To plant, water and grow that

which blossoms into life—all-encompassing and supportive branches, offering *abundant* life for all. Amen.

COMMUNION

A House in the Woods – Coleen Hampf

Succumb....we have a warrior in each one of us, ready to fight the next battle. It can be about health, justice, equality, protection of home and family. We defend ideas, thoughts, beliefs, religion. What if we succumb or surrender to love.

What if we lovingly took care of ourselves, our family, our home. What if we loved our neighbor and made sure they had the resources they need, no matter their skin color, age, gender or sexual orientation. What if we broadened our definition of neighbor and China became our neighbor. What if we loved our fellow nations and shared our ideas, science break-throughs and mystical beliefs. What if we became sensitive to our earth's destruction and succumbed to her beauty instead. What if we used it for healing like our ancestors did. What if we spent less time "doing" and more time "being." What if we extended a hand, helped someone out, stood up for something greater than us.

Today Steve and I will plant a tree. One given to us by a friend. We will remember what we have been through this year and how this time has changed us. We will enjoy the tree each season. The tree will become a home for birds and other sentient beings, succumbing to nature's calling. So will I.

PRAYER for TODAY:

Oh Great Creator God, thank you! Thank you for the

moisture that we and the earth thirst for in this dry and challenging time. As we tend to all things parched yet more in this enclosure time, fill the thirsting of our minds and souls, just as you do the earth. We have been stretched in so many ways—our patience, our perseverance, our understanding. Stretch us in life-giving, quenching ways too, as we seek to know You better, and our neighbor far and near.

Stretch us out of our comfort zones into new creativity. Show us how to love our neighbor more profoundly. How to "Be the Church" in powerful new ways outside of our indoor sanctuary. Guide us, Loving Spirit, in how to plant **seeds** – of kindness, and compassion. Life-giving perspective. Guide us in providing sanctuary for souls and endangered lives, wherever we find them and find ourselves, as we follow Jesus. Stretch us into new depths and creative paths—all as we are encircled and enclosed in your loving embrace. Amen.