Loaves and Fishes, **Rev. David Kraemer**

I think you know this story, but I ‘m going to tell it again, just like we did with Stone Soup.

From the book of Mark, we are told that soon after the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus took his disciples off in a boat “to a secluded place (to) rest for a while.”

But “Many people saw them leaving and recognized them, so they ran ahead from all the cities and arrived before them. When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (And) he began to teach them many things.

“Late in the day, his disciples came to him and said, “This is an isolated place, and it’s already late … Send them away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy something to eat.”

Jesus replied, “You give them something to eat.” But they said to him, “Should we go off and buy bread worth almost eight months’ pay?”

So Jesus asks them, “How much bread do you have? Take a look.” After checking, they said, “Five loaves of bread and two fish.”

“(Jesus) directed the disciples to seat all the people in groups as though they were having a banquet on the green grass. They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke the loaves into pieces, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. Everyone ate until they were full. They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish. About five thousand had eaten.”

Many of us will be feeding our own multitudes this week. Others of us will be among the crowds. And still others of us will be alone, with maybe only a loaf and a fish or two. So I thought this might be a good story for today. And anyway it fits with this whole food thing we’ve got going, with Stone Soup and all.

There are actually two stories about loaves and fishes in the Bible. This one, “The Feeding of the Five Thousand,” is reported, in different form, in all four of the gospels. The second one, “The Feeding of the Four Thousand,” is reported only in Mark and Matthew. The stories are similar. But the numbers are different.

In one story, there are five loaves, in the other there are seven loaves. In one there are specifically two fish, in the other there are an unspecified “few,” but they are said to be small. There’s also some difference in how many baskets of food were left over – twelve baskets or seven baskets.

I know how this is, because on Thursday, when it’s all over and the fridge is stuffed with plastic storage containers, if you were to ask me how much is left, I would say about a bazillion baskets, and that would be right.

Some people read these stories as true miracles – proof that Jesus was in fact, supernatural. The fact that there are two miracles reported in a couple of the gospels helps bolster this – “Look! He did it again.”

To read the Bible literally like this presupposes a whole lot of things about the human and nonhuman character of God, about who Jesus was, about how things work and the basic nature of reality – things that Unitarians and Universalists have pushed back on for centuries. It ignores any other possible interpretations, it admits to no fault. As a “proof” of anything, it begs the question.

Another way of looking at this is as an allegory, as a sign of something else. Some people read into this and see all kinds of correlation – the five loaves are really the five books of Moses, the 12 baskets are the 12 tribes of Israel. The reference to the number seven in the number of loaves or the leftover baskets has something else going on.

To me, people who see it this way are working too hard.

If there had been 10 baskets left over, for example, we might read into that some sanctimonious justification of our fingers and toes, or our base 10 numeric system, or the fact that a one and a zero form the basis of binary code that drives our digital age so that my smart phone is really an instrument of God.

There is the idea that the whole thing is simply an allegory for a spiritual meal. That it doesn’t have anything to do with loaves and fishes at all, but with the spiritual message that Jesus was trying to deliver.

But this view, too, often only props up the supposed message of salvation through Christ and through faith alone.

It presupposes the same supernaturalism and our supposed separation from God as the literalist meaning does.

What if we read this not as a literal miracle, not as some secret code, not as some argument for a particular view of heaven and earth, but as good advice, for how to live our lives?

What if we were to see this as a lesson in sharing? A push to get us to all work together.

What if we were to suppose that maybe people in the crowd had more food with them that they began to share once they saw the disciples start to divide things up? Whether you count this as a miracle or not, is this not a moral lesson? And what was Jesus teaching about, anyway, if it didn’t have anything to do with morality?

Pope Francis himself is reported to have said: “This is the miracle: rather than a multiplication it is a sharing, inspired by faith and prayer. Everyone eats and some is left over.”

What if we were to see this as a call to action? As a lesson in who we should be with and for each other?

The pope again, in an appeal to help a hunger relief project:

“The parable of the multiplication of the loaves and fish teaches us exactly this: that if there is the will, what we have never ends. On the contrary, it abounds and does not get wasted.”

What if we were to see this as a lesson for our own spiritual well-being? A lesson in gratitude and a lesson abundance? What if Jesus was simply saying be satisfied in what you have, it will be enough?

Our small groups this month considered the theme of abundance and found in their own lives a considerable amount of clutter. We have so much stuff in this culture. It crowds our closets, and our garages and our storage units, rented just so we have a place for the stuff we don’t use.

It crowds our minds, and it crowds our spirits. There’s actual science to report that clutter actually increases the amount of stress people feel.

What if Jesus, like the Buddha, was imploring us to live on a single grain of rice? What if, he was echoing Lao Tzu, who says “He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.”

I like the version of Stone Soup we read earlier especially because it puts the village in China and makes the travelers Buddhist monks, rather than French Soldiers, as is sometimes told. It makes the message similar to our interpretation of sharing. And it makes the spiritual practice of “enough is enough” not just about individuals but about the community.

What if we read loaves and fishes not about a particular religious view, but as a basic outlook on life?

Parker Palmer writes:

“The quality of our active lives depends heavily on whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance. Do we inhabit a universe where the basic things that people need – from food and shelter to a sense of competence and of being loved – are ample in nature?

“Or is this a universe where such goods are in short supply, available only to those who have the power to beat everyone else to the store? The nature of our action will be heavily conditioned by the way we answer those bedrock questions. In a universe of scarcity, only people who know the arts of competing, even of making war will be able to survive.

“But in a universe of abundance, acts of generosity and community become not only possible but fruitful as well.”

A world of scarcity or a world of abundance. Here, too, is a place to start. A choice we can make.

It shows up too in the Jewish idea of “dayenu,” “It is enough.”

Dayenu, from the song we sometimes sing from our hymnals, is a celebration by Jews of the many blessings that God has bestowed upon them, from deliverance out of Egypt, into the Promised Land. Each blessing, as we sing, would have been enough. But then there is more. There is always more.

Dayenu is a song of thanksgiving. It’s a reminder to count your blessings, to practice an attitude of gratitude. Brain science again, no matter what your circumstance, to push aside negative thoughts and instead consider the possibilities blazes neuropathways that lead to healthier lives.

Dayenu is a reminder that redemption or self-improvement is a process. It is an undertaking. The more you toot, the better you feel.

From our frenetic, anxiety-driven lives, I hope you can find some time this week, some relief from scarcity, a sabbath, in the true sense, as a day of renewal. To honor the sabbath, writes bible scholar Walter Brueggeman, “is a form of witness. It tells the world that “there is enough.””

I know some of us disciples will be cooking and cleaning and working our aprons off to make five loaves feed all the relatives. I know that some of those relatives will be working hard against a sense of abundance and that you might wish them to make themselves scarce.

I wish for you instead a time of abundance. I wish for you loaves and fishes enough to satisfy both your bodies and your spirits.

I hope that you find within yourself an ability to share, whatever it is that you have – loaves or fishes, onions or potatoes or meat or stones.

And I hope that you find, enough.