

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

### **Matthew 14:13-21**

#### **Bring Them Here To Me**

As many of you know, I participate, monthly, in a peer mentoring group for the Fruitful Congregation Journey our church has taken; each month, we begin our discussion, as a group, the "goings on" of our churches. There are four of us pastors who are being mentored by a fifth. One comes from a church near South Bend that has been on a death spiral the last six or seven years. Another comes from a suburban church not-too-far away that fell on hard times ten years ago or so, whose ministry action plan includes making a decision whether even to remain in existence. The third is a county seat church from northern Indiana that hasn't changed anything in seventy-five years and is still surviving well enough that they are not particularly committed to their ministry action plan. Not much happening in any of their churches. And, then, there is

#### **Union Chapel.**

For some of you gathered here, I'm simply sharing a reminder but, for several, what I am going to say is probably new information. Union Chapel voted, a few years ago, to enter into year one of Fruitful Congregation Journey, a year in which a team was formed, a team which

then travelled and met with teams from other churches to learn, to share, to listen; each member of the team did extensive reading and also met together here to review what had been learned so far and how the learning applied to our situation here at Union Chapel. I met, monthly, with the pastors of those same churches, did the same reading, learned the same lessons. And, together, after a year of hard work, we were convinced, I think, that Union Chapel must either renovate or die. In fact, “Renovate or Die” was the title of one of the very first books we all read. As a church, we also voted to go forward into year two, in which we collected and reported a tremendous amount of information about Union Chapel to the conference church development team. We were visited by about a dozen mystery guests who observed everything on various Sunday mornings from our parking lot to the warmth of our welcome to the music and the message—and the coffee. Last August—nearly a year ago—the conference church development team came for all day Friday, all day Saturday and Sunday morning to talk with us, to listen to us, to interview many of you and to generally look us over; but, first, they had read everything we had sent and they had scoured the data collected by the conference over many years so that they could not only understand what makes Union Chapel tick, but also advise us as to how we can reach more people with the love of Jesus. And on that Saturday night, they shared with me their Ministry Action Plan for Union Chapel, a prescription of concrete steps they advised us to take in order to become more effective—that is, in order to bear more fruit in the one mission that truly matters for Christians: making disciples. And we shared that Ministry Action Plan together on Sunday morning, and again and again in informational settings, where questions were asked and answered and where opinions were shared. And then, on the first Sunday in October, we put it up for a vote; it was straight up or down, accept all the prescriptions or accept

none. Vote “Yes” or vote “No.” And when the votes were counted, about ten times as many voted “Yes” as were opposed, and so we, all members and this community of faith, were committed to change. Committed to new ways. Committed to becoming the church that God is calling us to be, even if that new church, at first, feels a little uncomfortable, a little strange, a little challenging and unfamiliar. Committed to putting God’s will first and our preferences a distant second. Committed to doing it together.

And so that’s what we talk about in peer mentoring. Some of you know that I am painfully shy. Maybe it isn’t obvious, but self-promotion is anathema to me. Most of my life I have hoped that people would notice if I have done something well and quietly shake my hand or pat my head or whisper, “Good job.” The spotlight is not a comfortable place. So I feel a little embarrassment, even as, inside, there is immense pride, when I talk to my peers and our mentor about Union Chapel. It seems that each month there is something new to report. Last month, I got to explain what a “Dotted Line Diva” is and how this amazing group of volunteers is making a difference in the lives of people in need. Previously, I got to explain that we would be hosting fifty or more new families as their children began to attend the long-standing Northeast Cooperative Pre-School that has chosen to partner with us, and how the Indiana Fine Arts Academy is already a great partner looking for even more good work together. I have explained the great work being done by Lisa and Mike and Bette and Sharon and have told them of Lindsay’s arrival and her gifts and grace, and I have shared with them the joy of hearing Rupert walk in one day to tell me that he was “all in” as our youth leader. And I’ve watched as the others—pastors who have not seen so much fruit spring forth along the Fruitful Congregation Journey—some have found no fruit, or only bitter little nubs of fruit—I’ve watched as they have

sort of gritted their teeth even as they have celebrated the good news I've been blessed to share. But I've shared with them, as I share with you, that the growth we are experiencing is all about God, first, and all about your willingness to make changes, second. I am blessed to be your pastor.

We were talking in the office the other day—some of us who were around—and the conversation turned to the Divas, and to the Pre-School, and to the Indiana Fine Arts Academy, to our relationship with our new friends at Grace Tabernacle Ministries and our partnership with Engage Church. We talked about the many Twelve Step groups that meet here and are so grateful. I said that it amazes me that God has dropped these opportunities into our lap at this time. Someone else, though, answered that Union Chapel has had similar opportunities in the past, but always seemed to find reasons to say, “No,” reasons to back away from engagement. Not enough space, not enough time, not enough money—not enough. And so, in my mind, there is cause to celebrate that you, the congregation, have made the decision to say, “Yes” to God’s call to engage this community and to seize the opportunities God provides to use all of our best resources for the doing of God’s will. And you are doing it. Still, and even when it is uncomfortable.

So, does all that—the story of our Fruitful Congregation Journey—does it relate to our Scripture for this day, the story of Jesus feeding five thousand men, not counting the women and the children.? You bet it does; in many ways, it’s the very same story. Let’s pray together and then we’ll explore these words from Matthew for a while.

Lead us, we pray, as we walk into Your Word; hold us tightly as we bravely seek to live into Your will for us. Steady us as our shaky feet fall upon the path that leads to life, and make

us resolute in reaching out to all of the others, inviting and welcoming them as their feet find that same path, all that we might know this life of abundance here on earth and life eternal with You when our days here are accomplished. And in all that is said and done, all that is seen and heard, in all that is revealed and all that remains hidden behind the veil, remind us that the glory of this time and of these words is Yours, alone. Amen.

“Bring them here to me.” That’s what Jesus said. **Bring them here to me.** But what was Jesus talking about?

The Scripture begins with the words, “Now when Jesus heard this.” What Jesus had just heard was that John the Baptist had been murdered in prison, all at the whim and fancy of Herod’s step-daughter, all because the proud king had offered her anything she wanted—even half his kingdom. She wanted his head and the king would not back down from a foolish promise. Jesus’ cousin, the one who announced His coming and, in short order, baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, was dead. That’s what Jesus had heard and why He felt the need to get away. Like many guys today, Jesus thought the boat was a good place to go, a good way to escape the pressures of His life. It didn’t work. They crossed the sea only to find that people—crowds of people—would follow and find Him wherever He went, whether He wanted to be found or not.

Somehow, though, in the midst of his own grief, Jesus found compassion for the people who had followed Him. He began to heal and help them; the crowd adored Him and they were in no hurry to leave. Maybe the crowd was so ecstatic they lost track of time and place; it seems that Jesus, too, was oblivious to personal needs. But the disciples came to Him and reminded Him that time was passing and light was fading and, soon, the people would be hungry and there was no place nearby where they might find food. Send them away.

But, no. “You give them something to eat.” That’s what Jesus told the disciples. Hear His words in context now. He was grieving His cousin. And, in grieving His cousin, Jesus also had to confront the near certainty that He, Himself, would be killed. He had tried to escape, but the boat took Him only to another place they would find Him and swarm around Him, calling out their own needs with no concern for His needs. No concern for Jesus’ own needs. Somehow, He mustered compassion and engaged the crowd, ignoring, for a long while, His own troubles. And so it was that Jesus might have been disappointed—even a little testy--when all the disciples could come up with was that this crowd should be sent away before the sky grew dark and their stomachs started to rumble.

“You give them something to eat.” “Well, we would, but all we have is not enough—just five loaves and two fish.”

Do you think Jesus rolled His eyes? “Come on, you guys. Come on; haven’t you learned anything? Okay—bring them here to me.”

Bring them here to me. But what? Or whom? You see, here’s what we read next:

...he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The easy answer would be to assume that when Jesus said, “Bring them here to me,” He was referring to the fish and the loaves of bread. But what if—as I suspect—Jesus was talking about the people in the crowd. “Bring them here to me.” And then He ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. Jesus had compassion on the crowd, even though they interrupted His time

of mourning, His moment of grief, His getaway. Jesus healed their illnesses and He lost track of time or else just didn't care. Because, when we are grieving, sometimes the best thing is to just stay busy taking care of someone else for a while. But then, the disciples interrupted even this good time of distraction with their concern that the crowd would be hungry and their "who-knows-how-the hungry-crowd-will-react?" And then, in response to His assurance that the disciples, themselves, could feed the crowd, their refusal: "How can we feed them when all we have is five loaves of bread and a couple of fish?" Bring them here to me.

How much is enough? For us in America, this seems an impossible question. How can there ever be enough and, besides, what would we do with ourselves if we ever said, "that's enough"? **If you have enough, what do you do next?**

Okay, I'll speak for myself here. I compete, all the time. I love to win; I hate to lose. I've made lots of money and I've made not very much and, well, making lots had some real advantages. But making less has some advantages, too. Go figure.

Here's what I've learned. When I earned the most, I still approached life with an attitude of scarcity. A nice paycheck came in—would there ever be another one. If the next one came in and it was less—oh my gosh, the sky was falling. Lock it away, or put it under the mattress. Enough money was like enough toys or enough fun or good enough—there was no such thing. I could tell you the childhood stories that led me to be the way I am but—that's not the point. The point is, I don't think I'm the only one. I may have been pretty good with words back in the day, but the word "enough" was one I couldn't comprehend.

Were five loaves and two fish enough? Of course not.

It's a miracle story. Almost everyone agrees on that. But, **what is the miracle?** Nowhere in the text does it say that Jesus made more food appear. Read it for yourself—not right now, unless you just have to—but later, read it. It doesn't say that Jesus caught a single fish or caused one more loaf of bread to suddenly appear. Bring them here to me.

The crowd had followed Jesus. Willingly. Where Jesus was—that's where they wanted to be. There were five thousand people—not counting the women and children. There was not enough food for them all; this couldn't possibly go well. That's what the disciples thought. That's what the disciples said. That's what the disciples believed. Food was scarce. People aren't going to react very well.

Bring them here to me.

What's the better miracle? Multiplying fish? Causing bread to appear where there was none or, at least, not enough? **Or turning scarcity to abundance?** Turning scarcity to abundance?

How much is enough? You know, the answer to that question is, pretty often, however much we decide is enough. Changing our opinion is hard; changing our mindset is critical. And, maybe, miraculous. I think that was Jesus' true miracle that day by the lake. He changed the mindset of the crowd—certainly the mindset of the disciples—from one of scarcity to one of abundance.

Five thousand men, plus the women and the children; do you suppose that the whole number was closer to ten thousand? And women, travelling with children. And with men. Just an informal poll here—you don't have to respond, but can if you want. How many of you have something to eat in your purse? How many of you who came with a child have something in your purse, or in their backpack, or in a pocket to eat? Could you imagine, even in the first

century, that someone's mom—or someone's wife, for that matter—would leave home for an unknown amount of time without carrying along something to stuff into their mouths? No grocery store or Village Pantry? We act like that would have been a surprise. They knew McDonald's hadn't bought land along the Sea of Galilee yet. There would be no Pizza Hut, no Kroger, no Whole Foods where they were going. Of course they—at least the smart ones—of course they had carried some food along. But just enough; after all, food didn't grow on trees. Okay, you get the point. Martha had just enough for Joseph and little Priscilla and Nathaniel; Esther had brought something to tide Enoch and Elijah over until they got home for supper. Just enough; for food was hard to come by. But Jesus prayed. They listened. God was moved. That changed everything. When they were done passing the baskets, there was more food in them than had been there at the start. People were generous, giving, willing to share even that of which they had very little. For abundance does not mean extra; abundance means enough for today and the hope of enough for tomorrow, too. I'll share what I have today with someone who is without, and I'll trust that God will provide tomorrow, just as God has provided today.

So sometimes we have to give a little; other times, we have to give a lot. Opportunities to share—opportunities to give out of our abundance—come along, but they don't come along every day. In the past year, God has presented Union Chapel with several opportunities to share. So the United Methodist Women generously gave up some precious space, and the Buildings and Grounds team did, too, to allow the Dotted Line Divas to move in and do God's great work here. Our musicians—our choir and all the music team—gave up a dedicated music room downstairs so there would be plenty of space for the Preschool; the youth joined in, giving up their own special room, with its custom paint job and comfortable furniture, and moving upstairs—all the

way upstairs—so there would be space for both the Preschool and the Fine Arts Academy. The children’s ministry team moved upstairs and cleaned out cabinets and boxes and bags of treasures for the Preschool and the Academy and, in the process, also gave up the right to keep one room as their very own. Years and years of stored treasures in the barn were let go by those who bought, made or restored them so that more could be stored out there and less in here, where ministry, and not accumulation, is primary. A music position was eliminated so we could put funds into children’s ministry. Two staff members willingly took pay cuts that allowed us to spend money in different areas. One of those staff members will now be doing administrative work for the church plant we are supporting, Engage. We are energetically mentoring both Engage and Grace Tabernacle Ministries, a congregation made up of survivors of the genocide in the Congo. God is in all of this; our sacrifices pale in comparison to our increased ability to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world around us.

Scarcity is a mindset; there isn’t enough. There can never be enough. I’ll hold onto what is mine, even if I don’t use it, even if I don’t really need it, even if you do. But scarcity is not the way of Jesus. Jesus’ very life teaches us that it isn’t about us at all. The money in my pocket, the tools in my shed, the space in my closet—that food I brought for my kids or for myself--all meant to be given, all meant to be shared. That’s the lesson Jesus taught on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. That’s the lesson we are learning—with a little bit of struggle and strife—here at Union Chapel. So, let it be.

Let us come to that ultimate act of sharing—sharing in which we are the recipients, the invited, the blessed. In a moment we will pray a blessing over the bread and the juice, bread of

heaven and fruit of the vine, and I will invite all—all, without any reservation, without limit or hesitation—to come and to receive. But, first, hear these words of Andrew King, titled:

### **AND PLENTY FOR THE PILGRIMAGE HOME**

He came ashore into crowds:  
the crowds with little peace  
the crowds with little joy  
the crowds with little hope

with hurts unnumbered  
to bring to his caring

in a place like desert  
a place like emptiness  
a place of the aching heart

and the hour became late  
and the shadows lengthened  
and hunger was deeply felt.

Where shall crowds go  
in this hour like emptiness,  
in this time of warring,  
in the gathering shadows of despair?

Where shall we buy  
the hope that strengthens,  
the love that nourishes,  
the peace we so desperately need?

See how our baskets feel nearly empty,  
how in our own hurting,  
weariness and hunger  
we believe we have little to give.

But hear, in the words  
of the one who is kindness,  
whose compassion reaches  
beyond the setting sun,

the hope our hearts long for,  
on which we can feed:

hear the invitation  
to share even our weakness  
for it contains the promise

that that there is no emptiness  
where the Source of all life  
does not flow;

that there is no place where  
death's shadows are falling  
where the Redeemer of life  
does not go.

We can feed upon that promise,  
promise of sufficiency,  
promise of despair overcome –  
feed upon grace that is fullness of joy.  
We can share, eat, and be full.

And there is plenty for the pilgrimage home.