

Sermon Our Generous God

The first miracle, the "Feeding of the 5,000", is the only miracle—aside from the resurrection—recorded in all four gospels.

May the words from my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Grace and peace be with you on this day

Today's scripture passage from the gospel of John is really not about Jesus. For once, Jesus does not take center stage. It would have been about the disciples, but they were unable to complete the task. Instead, today's passage is about a child, the little boy who came forward to give of his bread and fish. He's the protagonist we should model our lives after. But before I explain, Let's embark on a short journey of the imagination. Close your eyes, without falling asleep, and allow yourself to be guided by my voice.

Imagine a lake on a crisp clear morning surrounded by a light wooded forest. The lake is dark, deep, wide and the opposite shore is distant, barely visible. There are no signs of civilization – no roads or highways, no condos, hotels or cabins. There are no boats, tourists or vacationers. You are alone with the lake. Your spouse or significant other is not with you. It's one of those moments in life that is just for you and no one else. It's a sacred moment and you're grateful for the solitude.

It's a nice day. The sun is out. The sky is light blue with sheets of thin clouds moving slowly over you. The temperature is just below perfect, and you're wearing a light jacket. To the right of you, at a distance, is a white-tailed deer, looking at you suspiciously. A cool breeze blows gently across the lake, and you zip up your jacket.

You feel good. Your legs and back are strong. You don't have a single worry in the world, so you decide to walk down toward the edge of the lake.

The gradual slope to the shore is easy, but just in case you reach out and grab a thin tree for stability. You turn and look for the deer but it's no longer there. Just before the shoreline, you stop to slip off your shoes and roll up your pant legs.

With the giddiness of a child, you approach the water and walk over the stones that decorate the shoreline. Millions of rocks, pebbles and stones, made perfectly round and smooth by the last ice age are wet from the tiny waves that lap onto them. The water is cold, and a tingling sensation pierces your bare feet.

It is with a sense of enthusiasm that you bend over to pick up a stone. You turn over stone after stone, looking for the right one. There are so many to choose from, and you finally find one that has the right size and shape. Roll it around in your hand. Feel its weight. You begin to wonder: How did it get there? For how many hundreds of years did it roll around the bottom of the lake, getting pushed by the different currents, until it finally reached this spot, along with several hundred other stones.

There's only thing to do, and that is to throw the stone as far as you can. So, with a glint in your eye, you look at the lake one more time and aim at a soft spot on the water. You move one foot back and change your footing. You pivot, and like a pitcher on the mound, you raise your other leg, wind up and thrust forward as you throw that stone as far and high as you possibly can.

The stone sails through the air and you realize you are about to disrupt the lake's ecosystem, which up to this moment, was enjoying a sleepy stillness. A stone is being

returned to the bottom of the lake. If it had a consciousness, would it be grateful or resentful? What about the rest of the ecosystem, and the fish, how are they going to feel about the rude awakening that is about to fall upon them?

The stone splashes into the water. Large concentric circles are born from this impact, and eventually, larger waves come to the shore and lap at your feet. **PAUSE**

Open your eyes to see the connections. The picture we just made in our mind, is life. Sometimes we are the stone, resting peacefully and then forces beyond our control throw us into a situation we didn't ask for and we suddenly find ourselves in deep waters, wondering if we'll ever get a chance to make it back to the shore. Other times we are the ones making the impact. We realize something has to change and we throw our best shot, knowing the consequences of our action will oscillate outward through the community. History and the Bible are full of such stories.

The gospel of John tells us that God gave his one and only son so that we might live. Why would God do that? It seems that God examined humankind in a similar manner as we examine our lake and decided something needed to change. So, God introduced Jesus into the eco-system of 1st century Jerusalem. What a splash that was! Its ripples are still being felt today.

Now, let's take this lake analogy and turn it around. You are neither the stone nor are you the person throwing the stone. You are the lake, an ecosystem that feeds other creatures and people, beautifying the surrounding region. People visit your shoreline because your soul is full of clear, life-giving waters. Words are the stones that are thrown into you, creating ripples in your being. Many of those words are compatible with your ecosystem and you welcome them.

But others are not.

Hate speech, whether its spoken or sent via email, is like a stone dipped in toxic paint. It cuts through our peaceful soul and burns. It ruins the moment, possibly the day or week. Violent words are worse. They carry in them the possibility of harm. Even though they're only words, they can feel like a barrel of poisonous chemicals that is dumped into our waters of our soul. People who have been subjected to hate, violence and abuse experience a disruption at the core of their inner being, turning the waters of their soul bitter. Only love, pure and unconditional, can filter out those poisonous elements and heal the abused.

Today's scripture passage describes how multitudes of people were attracted to Jesus. They came to hear words that would wash over their injured souls. They came to sit by a man whose demeanor and energy must have been more calming and reassuring than the clearest lake we can ever imagine. Jesus knew they were hungry, so he told his disciples to feed them. The disciples failed, when all of the sudden, a child came forward out of his poverty and offered food so that others may eat.

The child unlocked the miracle. You see the miracle was not in creating fish and loaves out of thin air, but in getting people to share. The miracle was in transforming hearts from fearful to generous. And it all began with a child who served as a catalyst to bring out the best in others. We should all be like that child, for only then we will we experience the Kingdom of God.

As a pastor, I often ask you to participate in the ministries and programs of the church. I'm aware of the doubt you must have when you hear my request. What do I get from participating? The answer is multi-dimensional, similar to our analogy of a pebble

thrown in a lake. Let us consider that this time the ministry is the lake, and the volunteer is the pebble. When we agree to enter a ministry, an impact is made, releasing several waves in concentric circles that flow outward. The first wave is personal. Let's use choir as an example. People in this ministry sing together because it feels good. It brings joy.

The second wave is communal. Friendships are formed and now they are part of something larger, singing together what they cannot sing alone.

The third wave is programmatic. The purpose of choir is to enhance the worship service by creating an environment that can channel the Divine for each person in the room.

The fourth circle is pastoral. Every program and ministry of the church has to draw people closer to God. Whether it's the confirmation class, a mission trip, or the chancel choir, ministries must create a pathway for people to experience God. It's supposed to change us. And so, we recognize that members of choir have found a pathway to God through the music.

The fifth and final wave is the God circle. God intends for us to experience a spiritual awakening so might become the people who strive to create God's kingdom here on earth. From a God point of view that is the ultimate goal for all of humanity. Not to become richer, stronger or prettier, but to become spiritually awakened and experience the joy of oneness with God. **PAUSE**

Today is the start of another ministry, our stewardship campaign. Over the next four to five weeks, we will be asking you to give. And the question many people will ask is "Why should I give? What's in it for me."

We give for the same reasons we participate in any of the programs of the church. We give knowing that our donation will have programmatic and spiritual outcomes. Through our donation we will become better versions of ourselves. We give because the act of giving is a requirement on the path toward spiritual enlightenment. People who seek God give generously. They seek not the physical pleasures of this world but rather the presence of the Holy Spirit. People who are afraid of giving are only cheating themselves from experiencing the joy that comes from giving.

It's like gifts on Christmas. On Christmas morning watch the face of the giver, not of the recipient. Watch how the giver is full of joy as the paper is torn apart and the box is opened. Watch how the giver is receiving through the act of giving, especially when it is out of love. This is what we want you to experience here at church with your monetary donation, a gift given out of love that brings joy to your life.

Now, consider your gift as the stone that is thrown into the lake we call church, making an impact that ripples outward. Some people give very large gifts, similar to boulders. Others give much smaller ones, similar to pebbles. But when we all stand on the lakeshore, placing our gifts at the same time, a thousand splashes are made that ripple outward and vibrate (turn around) like a choir singing **Amen**. Can you see it? God's divinity expressed by a community for the good of the community.

So, yes once again I'm asking you to make a monetary donation to the church.

- We need it for the building and the expenses it takes to maintain it.
- We need it for the salaries our employees depend on.
- We need it for the programs and ministries of the church. Without your monetary support, these wouldn't be able to exist.

- We need it for a dozen physical reasons, but the most important one is that we need your gift for your transformation. We want you to experience God through the act of giving, to be drawn closer to our Creator God and know the blessings of being generous.

There's all sorts of reasons why people give and as far as we're concerned, they're all good. We'll accept the gift regardless of the motivation. That's the church's end of the equation. But as pastors, Eric and I are preaching about your end of this equation, your soul. In the big picture, it's the only thing that matters.

Yes, there's an important football game tonight. Yes, there's an important election coming up this year. Yes, there's a needed vacation waiting for us. Yes, the small details of everyday living matter. From God's point of view, all those things matter. If they didn't, God would not have made them part of creation. They matter. But the real question is, "What does our soul look like as we do all those daily chores? Is it full of joy and love, or are we angry and resentful?" So, when we ask you to give, it's because giving to the church is important. It matters. But more importantly, we want you to give in a way that amplifies love and gratitude, on that closer walk with God, knowing that the Holy Spirit will use our gifts toward a grander and deeper purpose.

So, go ahead. Toss that stone into the waters of life. Be like the child and give that gift of love, with generosity and may it inspire others to do the same. Amen.