



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Stewardship as Faith”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

John 6.1-13; Ephesians 3: 14-21

November 22, 2015

Allow me to read, for you, what is probably a relatively unfamiliar passage from 2 Kings.

“A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. ‘Give it to the people to eat,’ Elisha said. ‘How can I set this before a hundred men?’ his servant asked. But Elisha answered, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: ‘They will eat and have some left over.’” Then he sat it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.” (2 Kings 4: 42-44)

I would dare to guess that many of you have never encountered this Old Testament parallel to the well-known story of feeding the five thousand. In this Old Testament story we hear not of Christ, but of God’s prophet Elisha, who feeds not five thousand, but just as miraculously, by the word of the Lord, fed 100 men, and still had food left over. Just twenty loaves and a few heads of grain for Elisha’s men, just five loaves and two fish for the followers of Jesus. But, still, in each case, everyone is fed.

I want to ask you to imagine those scenes. Countless people who have devoted their time and energy to following God’s servant (whether it be Elisha or Jesus) have found themselves in a field with no food, no money, and no energy left in their bodies. There is a rumor about a couple of fish or a little bit of bread, but that’s barely enough to feed the leading entourage – much less the entire crowd. These people are, I am certain, feeling completely without hope. In both cases there were hopeless followers and clueless servants. But, in both cases there was someone who believed in the power of God. In both cases, there was not nearly enough supply. In both cases there was not close to enough in the hands of the people to accomplish what they sought to accomplish. But, sure enough, with God, and with the faithful service of those who trusted in God to amplify their supply, in both cases there was more than enough to go around.

That’s the message of this passage that we read from the letter to the church in Ephesus – the tremendous power of God when coupled with our efforts. At the end of the third chapter we get

those words that read, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!” The Bible is never big on that notion that suggests that we, ‘Just back off and let God do it.’ Nor does the Bible ever seem to suggest that we should throw up our hands in apathy or disenchantment. The Bible is pretty consistently on the track that reminds us that God will add to our efforts, that God will magnify our supply, and that through that miraculous combination (our efforts with God’s blessing) wondrous works will be done.

So, I think, on this Consecration Sunday, on which we are encouraged to reflect upon the gifts we will offer to God’s purposes in and through our church, the words of the letter that speak of, “him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,” – I think those words deserve our attention. Listen to that statement, “his power that is at work within us.” The letter seeks to make clear, in a very real way, that the people of God are a channel, if you will, for God's power.

I’ve long struggled with the metaphor of people being God’s ‘tools’ in this world. While I have used the metaphor frequently myself, I’ve always been a little concerned with that notion of people being hapless instruments on God’s celestial tool-belt. I have always remained a little disconcerted about the apathy that image could create. Of all its wonderful applications, the difficulty I have with that metaphor is that we are so much more than some uncomprehending, inorganic, ignorant, device. A tool has no say in the matter, no action in and of itself. A tool is nothing more than an object that can be used and manipulated to serve a purpose. The metaphor works for so many reasons, but we have to remember that we are not puppets on a string nor wrenches in the hand of God – the roles and purposes we will serve are just as much up to us as they have ever been up to God.

When the letter brings out those words, “his power that is at work within us,” we are hearing that we are where God’s power will find its way into the world. We are the instruments through which the work of God will be accomplished. But, not in some abstract invisible way that happens without our knowing or conscious participation. But, instead, in very real and practical ways as you and I respond to God’s call and pursue God's will. That’s how God gets any job done – through the willing efforts and participation of his people, of us!

The other part of what this letter says, in this single sentence, is that by the power of God at work within us God is able to accomplish “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” In other words, we cannot even begin to comprehend what God can accomplish through the work of his people – through us.

So, we’re pretty much, as I see it, like those disciples who were gathered around Jesus, in this story that we read from the Gospel according to John. Just like those disciples we often find ourselves overwhelmed by the tasks before us. Just like those disciples we often find ourselves overcome in looking at what’s out there that needs to be done.

- As we look around our towns we see the need for the Gospel message in society.
- As we look in the cities we see the need for reaching out to the hungry, the homeless, and the sick.

- As we watch the news we see the need for a Christian message of love that will override the graffiti, the violence, and the death.

We cannot go an hour in our lives without a reminder of the work that needs to be done. And like those disciples, I think we sometimes want to just throw up our hands and say, "Golly, the thing is just too big. I can't do anything about it." But, Jesus said to his disciples, as Elisha said to his servant, "Take what you've got and use it – and let God do the rest." Apply yourself, with what you have, to the situation at hand – take a leap of faith – and see what happens.

I don't know what happened on the shores of that little lake that afternoon. I don't know how it happened that those five loaves and two fish became enough food and more for five thousand people. And, to me, it doesn't make any difference how it happened. What matters is that the people who were there, those who were faced with what seemed to be an insurmountable challenge, did what they could, with what they had, and through the power of God magnified in their work, their effort was multiplied, and it was more than sufficient.

The call, then, is to look around us in our neighborhoods, in our communities, in our churches, in any place where we are called, and do what we can do: one child at a time, one family at a time, one program at a time, one call at a time, one conversation at a time, whatever it is. There is no question that it seems that there is far more to be done in this church, in this community and in this world than we as individuals could ever manage to do. But, that is not a license for apathy. You cannot do it all. I cannot do it all. As a Church, we cannot do it all, but with the strength and will of God, put to work and magnified in our ministries and our efforts, God can, "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

Stewardship, as we have heard over these past few weeks, is a question of response – it is the question of how we will live and serve in light of the unmatched gift of grace and love that was shown to us in Christ Jesus. Stewardship, as we have heard, is a question of purpose – it is the question of how we will use the blessings God has bestowed upon us for the purposes for which God gave us those blessings. But, stewardship is also a question of faith – it is the question of whether or not we will trust in God to amplify our efforts, to magnify our works, to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine through the gifts we give, that the response we have to his Grace can achieve far more than we'd ever be able to achieve on our own. The ultimate question of stewardship is whether we will be driven by the grace of God, motivated for the purposes God has set before us, and empowered by the faith that, in God, all things are possible.