



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“100,000 Meals and Counting”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 13: 1-9, 24-32

January 19, 2020

As many of you have come to know over the past few years, I’m a numbers guy. I genuinely enjoy understanding and exploring the mathematic, statistical or other quantitative details involved in various situations. So, with that in mind, it’s not entirely a surprise that my mind started spinning in the early portions of our worship last Sunday.

For those of you who weren’t here, we had a guest from St. Ben’s with us during the 10am worship service last Sunday. One of their priests, Father Muthu, was here to receive a check that reflected the proceeds of our coffee booth collection at the Fox Point Farmers Market in 2019. It was a joyous occasion for many reasons, but in the midst of his words of appreciation, Father Muthu pointed out that he had gone back to their records and discovered that North Shore Congregational Church had been partnering with in the Loaves and Fishes meal program for thirty-nine years.

In case anyone is unfamiliar with the program, Loaves and Fishes is a meal program that serves dinner, six nights a week, for some 300 or so hungry individuals. So, my mind started doing the math. We serve once a month from September to May – that’s nine times a year. Nine times a year, at 300 people per meal, is 2,700 meals we serve each year. Going that final step, 2,700 meals per year, for thirty-nine years, is some 105,300 meals served by the members and friends of North Shore Congregational Church.

Now, obviously those numbers are general, and there were likely variations over the years. I can’t tell you if the 300 per night we’re serving now is more or less than we were serving ten, fifteen, or twenty-five years ago, but the point is not to get wrapped up in the specificities, but to understand the magnitude of the difference that was made by the fledgling seed of service that was planted in this church nearly forty years ago!

That’s one of the truly profound messages that I draw from these agricultural parables that Jesus shares in Matthew 13. I think I’ve explained, before, that about 5.5 years ago, shortly before our move to Wisconsin, I did a sermon series in my previous church in which I sent this Parable of the Sower to a handful of members and asked them to share what they drew as the message of the story. For a period of six weeks, their reflections became the basis of the worship that we

shared. One of the most meaningful reflections that emerged in that process, however, was the note that the sower kept sowing – everywhere!

I honestly imagine that the 21st century farmer must cringe at the indiscriminate manner in which the sower of Jesus' parable spreads the seed. A good farmer knows what soil to use. A good farmer has readied the soil for use. A good farmer is not going to toss his or her seed, this way and that, with nothing but the hopes and dreams of what may come. But, that's precisely what the sower of the Kingdom of God will do! The sower of the Kingdom of God is not pre-determining the outcome nor discriminating about where to spread the seed. The sower of the Kingdom of God just keeps sowing – everywhere!

As we read on to the additional parables we shared from the Gospel According to Matthew, we see the sower with wheat growing up among the weeds, refusing to clear the fields until that which is good has had a chance to grow. As we read the Parable of the Mustard Seed, we are humbly reminded of the manner in which the smallest thing can grow into the greatest of blessings. From the parable of the one spreading seed everywhere one can, to that of allowing the good to grow to its fullness, to the reminder that the smallest of seeds can grow to the greatest of blessings – what stands out to me in Matthew 13 is that these parables have an underlying theme that we don't necessarily know what will come of the seeds we sow. We don't always know the end. We can't always envision the conclusion. The culmination of the act that we begin is often far from clear, but that doesn't change our decision to act in the faith that some of those seeds will fall on good soil, thrive even among the weeds, and grow from the smallest of beginnings to the greatest of blessings.

You see, as my mind was spinning through those numbers and realizing the magnitude of our work with St. Ben's over the past four decades, it was actually that moment nearly forty years ago that was grabbing my attention. The truth is that I don't really know the story of how this ministry began in our church. I know it has had its ups and downs over the years. But somewhere, in some room, nearly forty years ago, someone turned to someone else and said, 'We should do this.' I don't know if it was from a member or the staff. I don't know if it was originally brought to a board, to a Minister, or to someone else. But, nearly forty years ago, someone in some room, somewhere, turned to another and said, 'We should do this.' Nearly forty years ago someone in some room, somewhere, planted the seed and started the ministry.

I don't know if that person is here today or not. I do wonder, however, what that person would think about the fact that the seed they planted nearly forty years ago grew to a ministry that would serve 100,000 meals and counting! As much as this ministry is such an engrained part of our culture today, the reality is that at that moment it was an idea no different than the dozens of others that are brought forth every year. They had no idea what this would become. They had no idea what difference it would make. They had no sense of the legacy of care and compassion that would grow from the seed that was planted, but they planted, they worked, they prayed, and they allowed the opportunity for the seed to become what it has become. The sower of the Kingdom of God doesn't necessarily know the end, but still ceaselessly spreads the seed!

Looking back to our Call to Meditation this morning, I think I shared this same quote from Dr. King a few years ago. Coming to these reflections on the eve of his remembrance, however, I

was reminded of the depth and import of his words. “Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” I'd argue that this is another way to say the same thing that I've been saying for the last ten minutes. We don't always know the end. We can't always envision the conclusion. The culmination of the act that we begin is often far from clear, but that doesn't change our decision to act in the faith that some of our seeds will fall on good soil, thrive even among the weeds, and grow from the smallest of beginnings to the greatest of blessings.

Over the course of the last forty years, the seeds of love and compassion that have been planted in and through this church are countless. Some burned out before they ever began, some sprouted with great energy but faded just as quickly, some grew to great beauty and served great faith until their cycle of ministry concluded, and some remain today, towering over us like a beautiful Oak giving rest to the weary and shelter to those in need. What every ministry and every effort had in common, however, was but one thing – no one knew if or how it would grow, they simply knew that there was an opportunity to plant a seed and to see where God's love might lead it.

Somewhere in this room there is someone thinking, “Maybe we should try this.” Somewhere in this room there is someone saying to herself, “Perhaps I should do that.” Somewhere in this room there is someone whose mind keeps racing, “I wonder if this might make a difference.” If that's you, plant the seed! It may be something here in this church, it may be something in another group of which you are a part, it may be something in your professional or personal life, but someone in this room is listening to this message with a little bell ringing as a reminder of that thing that just keeps creeping into your mind. If that's you, just remember that nearly 40 years ago, someone in this church turned to someone else and said, ‘I think we should serve meals at St. Ben's.’ And, 100,000 meals later, we still are!