



Reading Between the Lines

Mark 6: 30-44

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How do you build a fairy garden?

To a creative, craft-loving person that might sound like a fun Saturday. To the rest of us—well, it sounds about as easy as feeding 5000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. It's going to take a bit of a miracle.

Can you simply wish it to be so? If you're Jesus, that's an option. Jesus walked among us, suffered for us, returned from death and continues to be present with us. Stretching 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread into a meal for thousands—it's not a big deal. But the scripture we just read doesn't say Jesus multiplied the food with a wave of his hand. Which returns us to the question:

How do you build a fairy garden? Or feed 5000 people with only two bags of groceries?

Do you point to a leader and ask him or her to get it done? Jesus didn't say "multiply" and the bread multiplied. Instead, he said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat." You do it. You take care of it. But the scripture we just read doesn't say the disciples multiplied the food either.

How do you build a fairy garden? Or feed 5000 people with only two bags of groceries?

How does Dave Huffman help bring 30 refugees from persecution in Burma to safety in Duluth? How does Angie O'Farrell befriend a complete stranger --who doesn't speak her language-- while he's washing and drying his clothes? How do teenagers Jillian Zinn and Michael Griswold get a smile and a thank you out of an angry woman who has waited in line for two hours in our building to cast her vote for President of the United States? How does Southern Christian gentleman Keith Funderburk find common ground and a common purpose with a Muslim Egyptian native?

When something can't be easily explained, we turn to the Word of God: to scripture. And here is where it gets tricky. Sometimes scripture doesn't give us a direct answer, a "yes" or "no." There

is evidence that this is intentional—Jesus often answered his disciples’ questions by telling a story, offering a parable. Why doesn’t Jesus spoon feed us everything we need to know?

Here’s what I suspect. Sometimes the most powerful message in scripture isn’t present in the words themselves –it’s in what we read between the lines. When we are given every detail, we miss the opportunity to explore. To engage with the story. To ask questions and fill in the missing pieces. When you think about it, “Love thy neighbor” is pretty general, pretty vague. Who is my neighbor? The person who literally lives next door to me? The person who offers me technical help from a call center in the middle of India? Jesus doesn’t say who, though he showed us again and again how to look beyond next door. Still, who our neighbor is remains up to us to discern.

When we are challenged to read between the lines, to think deeply, and open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit, we are responding to God’s word. It’s when we have to fill in the details ourselves that we are changed. The words of scripture are the first half of the gift from God. Thinking through how we understand scripture and respond to it—that’s the second half of the gift from God. What you and I fill in between the lines of the text: that’s what changes us and offers us new life.

Jesus doesn’t say, “I’ve got this. You just sit and watch and be amazed.” No, he says, “You’ve got this. I’ll be right here, watching you, assuring you of my presence and power. Now you give them something to eat.” Theologian Lamar Williamson, Jr. writes, “Jesus’ demand of his disciples reveals his confidence in them . . . and that confidence is undergirded by his power to provide all they need for the task with plenty left over for themselves.”

Notice Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to make themselves more comfortable: “Here, you eat first, you’re the leaders.” One of the first things I fell in love with about Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church is how we serve communion. The pastors and the elders don’t serve one another first. No, they get in line with everyone else and often are served last. It’s indicative of how we believe we are called to live as disciples. The ministers and elders of this church don’t “deserve” to be first in line for anything. We – all of us in this room this morning—hear the call to serve others first. And we do it.

What if the real miracle in the feeding of the 5000 is not in Jesus Christ and not in the disciples—but in what the 5000 people did. Through the steady presence, influence, and unquestionable love of Jesus AND through the encouragement, leadership and realistic examples set by the disciples, perhaps those 5000 made that food multiply.

I’m a snacker. Are you? I can reach into my desk drawer or the console in my car or my purse or sometimes even into my pocket—and come up with something to satisfy my hunger craving. Those 5000 hungry people didn’t have desk drawers or car consoles, but don’t you think there were some leather pouches among the crowd? A pocket filled with a hard piece of bread that a

mother pushed into her son's hands as he ran out the door seeking to hear what this Jesus had to say about changing his life?

Could the miracle be that the disciples went into the crowd, preaching love and new life and their very words inspired a generosity that seemed impossible? That the people themselves discovered enough for all if they were to truly love one another?

A year ago I went to the hospital because we were losing our beloved member Glen Helmstetter to cancer. Hospitals are intimidating—for years I avoided them because I found them cold, and filled with harsh fluorescent lighting and the smell of disinfectant. Though now I see God in every corner of the hospital, most people avoid visiting them at all costs. Often I don't see another soul when I walk down the hall to visit a patient's room. So you can imagine my surprise when the elevator doors opened on the fourth floor and I saw so many familiar faces—many of them yours: teenagers and toddlers, men and women--people spilling out of Glen's room and into the lobby and the vending area. People were everywhere! Yes, there were other more inviting places to be in Atlanta that evening, but every one of Glen's visitors chose to be at Gwinnett Medical in Duluth because they felt called to be there. That day it wasn't up to the minister to comfort the family. It was a group effort. As it should be.

When they were faced with 5000 hungry people, Jesus said to his disciples, “You take care of these people. I'm right here beside you and I know you can do it. Trust what I've taught you. You've got the basics, a bit of food, the raw materials. You have the people skills I've taught you—love one another, show mercy to the poor, worship nothing but God. You've got this.”

So back to the original question: How do you build a fairy garden?

On Maundy Thursday fifty of us gathered for a shared meal, singing, worship and conversation. We all sat together at one big cross shaped table and marked the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. At one point I was sitting with members Nancy and John Garrett, Rose and Paul Shane and Rev. Dave Fry. Rev. Jennie Sankey gave us a question to discuss, “Where have you seen God this week?”

That question's pretty general, pretty vague—like “Love your neighbor.” As an educator, Jennie wants us to read between the lines, dig deeply into the question and fill in the details ourselves. An image popped into my head and I said, “I saw God in the Garrett's backyard. The pictures Nancy posted on Facebook were so pretty, with the flowers popping and the water flowing. It looks as if God just said, ‘Look at what I can do!’”

To which Paul Shane replied, with a twinkle in his eye, “Well, don't you think Nancy and John had a little something to do with it?” Paul had a point. Somehow two fish and five loaves of bread yielded enough to feed an army. Somehow a run of the mill backyard turned into an expression of God's glory. How did that happen?

God gave the Garretts the raw material—an area with fertile ground that gets solid sun and healthy rain. And God gave them a continued presence, a feeling of security that invited them to invest themselves in a long-term project.

God also gave the Garretts Bernie Kida. Bernie likes to see things grow—he feeds PHPC teenagers and men at Clifton Night Shelter. He sends notes to your ministers when he notices something beautiful. Bernie has a God given artistic eye and an appreciation of beauty –and he uses those gifts as a landscape designer.

Bernie gave the Garretts his vision.

So trusting in God and trusting in their fellow church member, the Garretts got busy. And their backyard transformed from this—to this. A place to watch the stars, to swap stories around the fire, to share meals—a place even beautiful enough for a backyard wedding. A wedding in and of itself an expression of expanding hearts and minds. God provided the material, Bernie provided the vision and the Garretts got themselves a fairy garden.

Here is Nancy and John’s beloved granddaughter, beaming, delighted in a backyard fairy garden. The joy on that child’s face is enough spiritual food to feed 5000 and still have baskets overflowing with leftover grace.

With God’s gift of creation, our Savior’s gift of grace, and the surety given to us by the ever-present Holy Spirit, we can do amazing things. Not to earn something or prove something—but to transform a soulless community into a place of abundance. The abundance of overflowing baskets of food, the abundance of joy found in relationship, and perhaps most of all, the testimony of the abundance of new life that can be written on the flip side of a piece of cardboard. Amen.





