

“They Need Not Go Away”

Matthew 14:13-21

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For many years now, when we have come to the conclusion of our worship hour, you have heard me offer a benediction that sounds something like: “Surely, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for the living of these days.” I say this, basically, because I believe it is so. In many ways, our culture urges us to think and to make decisions from an attitude of scarcity. But our faith teaches us to think and to make decisions from an attitude of sufficiency.

Though there may be a shortage of job opportunities, a shortage of fossil fuels, a shortage of cures for cancer, a shortage of scholarships for deserving college students; there is a sufficiency of grace. Though certain commodities may need to be rationed and quotas established on certain products, God places no such limit on love’s availability.

My grandmother Clemmer was a frugal woman. She wasted no scrap of fabric, no bite of leftover food, no inch of extra yarn. She didn’t buy something she could make her self. She gave us a certain scowl if she thought we were squandering our allowance on something as trivial as baseball cards. She carried her handbag up under her arm as if she were guarding the gold at Fort Knox. On a first glance, she appeared to be operating out of a place of scarcity, out of a place of fear that there might not be enough.

But on those occasions when we seemed to demonstrate a little homesickness or if we felt a little unloved or under-appreciated, she would open that purse, fish around in its depths, and get this look in her eye, this smile on her face; and she would pull out from some secret place in that purse a box of Chiclets, little sugar-coated squares of chewing gum. And she wouldn't give us just one, but TWO, sometimes THREE! It was an astounding display of her generosity, her unbounded love, her grace. Those were moments of sufficiency, when there was enough, more than enough. And it wasn't about the gum; it was about the love.

In the story from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus and the twelve disciples had retreated to a place apart to grieve the death of John the Baptist. (His tragic death is recorded earlier in chapter fourteen.) The crowds, however, had sought him out because they had witnessed Jesus healing a man with a withered hand. They had seen him restore sight to the blind and speech to one who was mute. They were present when he healed a paralytic and also when he cast out an unclean spirit. There were still many who were sick and so their families were bringing them out to meet the Healer from Nazareth.

At the end of the day, the disciples focused on the large number in the crowd, more than 5000; and they focused on how hungry they must all be; and on how the disciples certainly didn't have enough groceries to satisfy that much hunger. Two fish and five barley loaves only stretch so far! They were focused on the scarcity. They were thinking and deciding from that place of insufficiency. They urge Jesus to dismiss the crowd so they can go and buy food for themselves in the surrounding villages. But he will not be paralyzed by scarcity. He will not lead by fear. He is grounded in sufficiency. "They need not go away," he says, "you give them something to eat!" When they start doling out the bread and the fish, it is like Gramma Clemmer doling out the Chiclets. It's not about the bread. It's not about the fish. It's about the love.

It's about the sufficiency of grace, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is enough for everyone! Indeed, there are twelve baskets of leftovers! Twelve baskets!

No one knows this truth better than John Newton. It's hard to offer a sermon on the sufficiency of grace without invoking the name of John Newton, the slave ship sea captain responsible for the misery of countless Africans, the slave ship sea captain who had the spiritual awakening, who discovered one starless night in the North Atlantic that the love of God is poured out abundantly, even for the likes of him! He walked away from the human trafficking, and composed that hymn we all know so well, Amazing Grace. The last verse of that hymn sings:

“When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we'd first begun.”

In this one verse, he captures the essence of the sufficiency of grace. Unlike other commodities that eventually arrive at their expiration date and need to be discarded, the grace of Christ Jesus knows no such time line, no such boundary, no such limitation.

Andrea and I were recently approached by a volunteer from the South Church lead gifts committee of the Capital Campaign. Apparently, we have been identified as ones who have the means to make a lead gift. Our first impulse was to calculate the scarcity. We noted the rise in the price of gasoline. We calculated how much it will cost for Lucas and Nina and Corinna to go to college beginning in the year 2021. We noted that her VW Passat and my Chevy S-10 pickup can nearly qualify for antique license plates. We zoomed in on the scarcity. But then something mysterious happened to change our thinking. I guess, maybe, I saw a box of Chiclets at the grocery store.

We began to see the evidence of God's generosity, God's grace, God's abundance. We began to focus on the plenty. And that made all the difference.

Some have studied the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and have suggested that the real miracle lies in the idea of sharing. They put forth the thought that one family shared what they had and then other families caught the spirit of the sharing and a lot of tuna fish sandwiches were broken in two. And in this way, the whole crowd was satisfied. But I see the miracle differently. As long as the disciples focused on the insufficiency of their resources, no miracle could take place. It's not so much that Jesus worked magic with the bread and the fish... poof! Enough for 5000! It's that he persuaded the disciples to operate out of the place of sufficiency, out of the place that dares to believe there will always be enough.

That is how the text spoke to me this week, and that is what I wanted to share with the church this morning, in the greatest of hope! Amen.