

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose
July 26, 2015
"The Pot Luck that Never Ends"

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Early one morning, after a night of violent storms which had cast many fish onto the beach, a little boy was picking up objects off the beach and tossing them out into the sea. An older gentleman approached him and saw that the objects were starfish. Their little breathing spores were clogged and stuck with sand and the morning sun was baking the little fish.

"Why in the world are you throwing starfish into the water?" asked the gentleman. "If the starfish are still on the beach when the tide goes out and the sun rises high in the sky, they will die. If the tide is strong enough, maybe they will live", replied the little boy. "That is ridiculous. There are thousands of miles of beach and millions of starfish. You can't really believe that what you're doing could possibly make a difference!" The little boy picked up another starfish and remarked as he tossed it out into the waves.

"It made a difference to that one."

"It makes a difference to this one!" A classic child's perspective - simple and yet profound at the same time. Today's readings deal with someone making a difference in someone else's life, for better or for worse. And it hasn't changed through the ages we are still asked by God to make a difference just as the little boy in the story above was trying to make a difference for the little starfish and just as the young boy in today's gospel reading offered up the little bit that he had because he trusted Jesus to make a difference.

Just what did the young boy offer to Jesus? His lunch of five barley loaves and two small fish. It was the boy's lunch. Hardly enough food to feed 5,000 people, much less 5 people. How could this small amount possibly make a difference?

Obviously the majority of the disciples didn't believe that a child could make a difference back then. The disciples were tired and grumpy and just wanted to go away from the crowd. And they didn't have much faith in Jesus being able to feed the crowd even after all the time they had spent with Jesus. Philip had no confidence at all in Jesus' abilities but Andrew was willing to go and look and see what he could find to assist Jesus in trying to feed the crowd. And for the child to give what he had (and we need to remember that little boys are always hungry) for Jesus to use was a huge step in trust. This little boy gave up his lunch to a stranger to feed a crowd; the little boy probably figured that he wouldn't even see any of his lunch at all. And yet he trusted Jesus to make a difference; to feed the other children in the crowd as well as the adults. That nameless child believed that his lunch could make a difference.

The theme of the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering was Rise Up! As Christian youth, and leaders, we are followers of the risen one, called and sent to rise up with good news of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world. We gathered together in worship, community, service, and Bible study to better understand God's good news for this beloved world. We worked hard over the last week to learn to better understand the forces of oppression and injustice that keep God's people from rising. We learned more

about racism – within us, around us, and in the systems and structures of this world that seem so hard to change. In the wake of the Charleston shooting, not far from our home, this is particularly important.

One of the speakers was Mikka McCracken, a young woman who grew up in Bemidji, Minnesota and who now works as a program director for ELCA World Hunger. She spoke passionately about the ongoing reality of poverty and hunger in our world – a world in which one billion people still live with food insecurity, an unacceptable reality for those of us who worship a God of abundance. But she reminded us that hunger and poverty don't exist because of scarcity; hunger and poverty exist because of inequality. This world produces more than enough food for everyone to be fed; we, however, are trapped in cycles of selfishness and waste. But because we are people of faith, people who worship the One who looked at five loaves and two fish and made it work, we can not only fight poverty and hunger. We can end them. Mikka said "This is the work of Jesus, and in him it's not just possible; it's doable."

Many of us probably feel like we can't possibly do enough to make a difference. We don't believe that the Lord could possibly have any use for the small amount that we have to offer? How many times have we felt that we don't have any gifts or talents of any significance to be used by God? If only we would realize in serving God, there is only one gift or ability that matters and that to be available when God needs us. No matter how much or how little our abilities, if we do not make ourselves available to do God's work, they will do no good for anyone. Sometimes we assume that God could not possibly use us in his work because we have no special abilities, talents or gifts. But the truth is that God knows who we are and loves us as we are because he made us who we are. He doesn't ask what gifts we bring to the table because he knows very well what we have to offer. He asks only that we make what we have to offer available for his use."

And being available makes a difference. Just as the five small barley loaves and two small fish made a difference; just as throwing all the starfish found on the beach made a difference to those thrown back into the ocean. It is our gifts and talents and our availability which make a difference in other people's lives.

I know the little ones today will look at me and say I can't make a difference I'm too little. Well, I have news for them they do make a difference. Every time they smile, every time they give a "high 5", every time they have a hug for someone, every time they bring a smile to someone's face, they have made a difference in that person's life. So don't say you're too small to make a difference.

Making a difference and being available. The loaves and fish that Jesus gave thanks for, fed that huge crowd. People ate until they had had enough. They ate and were strengthened by this food just as the Israelites were fed and strengthened by the manna in the wilderness and just as we are strengthened by the Eucharist. This feeding of the 5,000 is symbolic of the Eucharist. The body and blood that we receive during the Eucharist makes a difference. It is our opportunity to reconcile ourselves with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ; it is an opportunity to take down the walls and barriers we have built between each other; it is an opportunity to be strengthened for the days that follow; it is an opportunity to make ourselves available to God during those precious few minutes of prayer after we receive the body and blood of Our Lord. It is an opportunity to find out how we are to be the ears, eyes, hands, feet, and mouth of Christ here on earth.

Communion is dangerous in the most beautiful way. As we receive the bread and drink the wine, we are united in one body – across boundaries, across time. We take Christ into us. We live as Christ lives. We do as Christ would do. We serve who Christ would serve. We are compelled to use our lives to do

God's work.

As our group watched 30,000 youth and adults receive communion together in Ford Field alongside the Dome ushers, the paramedics, the Gathering volunteers, security personnel, and just about anyone in our path, we were caught up in God's vision of a community of people whose likeness in Christ outweighed the differences between us. For a moment we could see that there really is no longer male or female, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, slave or free. For all of us are claimed by God and nothing else matters. The invitation to take and eat couldn't be contained. I saw in the eyes of our youth the realization that Communion was not just a meal served in relative private in the midst of a church service. Jesus intended to change the world with this simple food. When people gather around this table, it's hard for walls of division to remain. It is difficult to let anyone go hungry. It's challenging not to find something that connects you to one another. And when Jesus invites us to sit down at the table with him, you know that we are in for a feast. You can expect to be changed. You can expect to experience the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.