

Jesus and his disciples have just received news of the brutal murder of John the Baptist. And, they have just experienced a long day with large and desperate crowds of people. They are grief stricken, exhausted, and seek to simply get away. Mourning John's death, physically and emotionally exhausted, Jesus tries to slip away in a boat, attempting to go to a **deserted** place, a place where there is **nothing** and no one present. But, the crowd follows him anyway. And, the disciples do what we would likely do, they tell the people to go away. However, thousands follow and what does Jesus do? He has compassion and begins healing the sick. As dinner time approaches, the disciples are very ready to call it quits and send the crowd away. But, Jesus invites the multitude to eat and, much to the disciples' dismay, asks **them** to feed the thousands. The disciples are shocked. They are only able to find two fish and five loaves of bread. So, **they** operate out of the perspective of scarcity and nothingness.

"**We have nothing...**" they say, dismissive of what they see as an insufficient offering in comparison to the enormous need. Then, something happens! It does not really matter so much how we understand the miracle that follows. It does not matter whether Jesus miraculously creates more molecules of bread and fish or whether you see the miracle in the

possibility that **sharing** those first loaves and fish prompted others to begin sharing what they had until there was more than enough for all. The “how” isn’t important. What matters is that God saw a possibility where the disciples saw **nothing**. As Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “**nothing**” is God’s favorite material to work with. The disciples looked at 5 loaves and 2 fish and saw nothing, but God looked at it and saw a feast!

I think this gospel story is our story in multiple ways. First, when it comes to money, who hasn’t at one point or another looked at his or her finances and saw what amounted to **nothing**. I know I have. But, quite frankly, for most of us, it’s really a matter of how we see what we have, a matter of rejecting the societal impulse to always want more than we have, rejecting the impulse to continually consume. Even in the church, we look at what we have and wish we had more of it, forgetting that God has promised to transform **all** we have. Yes, “nothing” is God’s favorite material to work with.

This is also our story as we look at our efforts to combat hunger. When we look at the little bit of food we give to ArrowTree Apartments or to the Caring Committee projects each year, our gifts can seem like 5 loaves and 2 fish when compared to the actual need that exists. And, yet, God uses it in ways that begin to transform peoples’ lives. You see, these small

things begin to take on a life of their own, making dents in the need that is indeed still great. God sees our meager offerings, receives them and sets a table for a feast! Yes, “nothing” is God’s favorite material to work with.

While these connections to our everyday lives are obvious, there is something more to the story. Before the disciples even identify the loaves and fish, they look out at the crowd of hungry people and see a problem. They see nothing good coming from a hungry mob. But, Jesus’ invitation to feed the thousands rather than send them away indicates that he looks at the same crowd and sees the possibility of a celebration. Thousands of hungry people are not a problem but an opportunity for God to work. Yes, “nothing” is God’s favorite material to work with.

Far too often we function out of a perspective of **nothingness**. We see a world embroiled in multiple conflicts and we see no hope for peace. Many days it seems like we are staring down a hungry crowd with nothing but 5 loaves and 2 fish. But somehow, in the depth of this turmoil, we trust God’s promises that God sees fighting people, helpless bystanders, hungry people, and activists who go unheard, and God **still** sees the possibility of peace and justice. We see nothing, but God is already planning that great feast where Israelis will be sitting next to Palestinians, Ukrainians will be eating at table with Russians, Syrians from both sides will be sitting next to

one another, and North Koreans will be feasting with Americans. Yes, “nothing” is God’s favorite material to work with.

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How often do we look at people and see nothing, see people we judge as not enough? It happens most often with people at the margins, those we consider the least of these. People we see as too young or too old, people we label as disabled. We forget that infants have something to teach us about God. That people in nursing home beds who can’t even recognize their own family members have something to teach us about God. That people in ICU beds who can’t speak because of breathing tubes in their mouths have something to teach us about God. That people whose abilities are different from our own have something to teach us about God. That people whose gender identity is different from ours have something to teach us about God. That people whose skin color, ethnicity and life experience is different from ours have something to teach us about God. God invites us to see not another problem, but another person who is loved by God and who is invited to join the feast!

This nothingness perspective and thinking is also an aspect of every congregation in which I have served, either as music director or pastor. People in churches at one time or another, including pastors, look around

and see the equivalent of the disciples' "nothing." Too small, too big, too many programs or not enough. The people are too old, or too young, or not friendly enough. Too much this and not enough that. Have you said this our thought this about our congregation? If only we had more people.... Or more of a certain kind of people.... Or more energy..... Or more money.... Or more people willing to help.... You get the idea? The problem is that every church is imperfect. And, in every church, there's a way to look at the crowd of people and see not enough. But, when God looks at it, God says, "Look at these people! Let's have a feast!" Yes, "nothing" is God's favorite material to work with.

In today's reading, at the end of the story there are leftovers! In fact, leftovers abound! Leftovers are the opposite of nothing! Sometimes, we even see leftovers as a potential problem. After a long day and week like the one Jesus and his disciples had experienced, I'd be tempted to leave the leftovers on the ground for the birds, then head home and off to bed. But, they take the time to gather them as a sign of the abundance of the feast and there were 12 baskets full. Twelve, the sign and symbol of abundance and completeness. You see, God's bounty is more than a single feast can ever contain. Yes, "nothing" is God's favorite material to work with.

Today's gospel reading also foreshadows what is to come. At the end of Matthew's gospel, the disciples will again find themselves seeing **nothing**. They will look at the crucified Jesus and see **nothing** but a dead body. But, three days later, they **will** stare in awe at the empty tomb, **shocked** by the sheer abundance of what it represents. This is a reminder for each of us that all those moments when we see our "nothings" transformed into "somethings," something beyond belief, we again experience God's promise to us. And, when some day we stare into the future and see nothing but death, even there, God is transforming what seems like absolute nothingness into something new. Yes, "nothing" is God's favorite material to work with.

When we see nothing, God gives us new eyes, a new heart and a new mind to see "nothing" as something new. Whatever we don't see enough of today, God still sees something. In a few minutes, we will join the hungry crowd as God invites us to partake of this little bit of bread and wine, nothing really. But, as we eat this bread and drink this wine, God will gift us with the very life of God, richness beyond measure. And, in that feast, God will transform our **nothingness** into the broken body of Christ for service in this world. So, come, to the hungry feast!