

Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21; Pentecost 9A; 8/2/20
Pastor Ellen Schoepf

As we live these present days, the challenges we face are affecting us in multiple ways. I have been thinking about this and have realized one way our lives have changed during this pandemic time is that we are experiencing a certain kind of disorientation and a sense of dislocation. This is not a geographical dislocation, but dislocation as it relates to our daily patterns, structures, and activities. All we need do is look at the way we are presently worshipping – either online, or in-person but outdoors. As I think about our present context, the following descriptive words or phrases come to mind – dislocation, exile from what we once had, sorrow, loss, a hunger for community resulting in a sense of emptiness, and a sense of nothingness compared to what we once had. And, as so frequently happens, today's life-giving readings provide the nourishment we deeply need.

In our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel as they experience **chasmic** dislocation, sorrow, desolation, emptiness, a sense of **nothingness** and loss. They are in exile, in Babylon. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem had been burned and the temple destroyed. The king was exiled, the leading citizens were deported, and the public life they had known, all had come to an end. And, into this

context, the prophet Isaiah speaks words of consolation and hope saying, “Hey there, all who are thirsty, come to the waters! Are you penniless? Come anyway – buy and eat! Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk. Buy without money – everything’s free!” Imagine hearing these words, “come, buy and eat, even though you have no money.” The prophet addresses the void, the emptiness, the nothingness compared to what once was. He addresses the dislocation and the sorrow in the lives of the people. And, he uses the metaphor of food to remind them of the covenant that God had established and renewed. Isaiah likens God’s faithful, everlasting covenant to food freely given, as he says, “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.... come to me, listen, so that you may live.”

As I hear these words, I must say they touch the deepest places of my being when I realize this very God is so faithfully present to us, holding us in love, even as **we** experience a sense of dislocation and emptiness.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples have just received news of the brutal murder of John the Baptist. They are grief stricken, exhausted, and feeling great sorrow. Mourning John’s death, Jesus tries to slip away in a boat, attempting to go to a **deserted, empty** place, a place where there is **nothing**, no one present. However, the crowd follows him, and the disciples tell the people to go away. And, what does Jesus do?

He has compassion and begins healing the sick. As dinner time approaches, much to the disciples' dismay, Jesus asks the disciples to feed the thousands, and they are shocked. They are only able to find two fish and five loaves of bread. So, **they** operate out of the perspective of scarcity, **nothingness, and emptiness.**

"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 *how* Jesus creates more. What **does** matter is that he 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!**

Before the disciples even identified the loaves and fish, they looked out at the crowd of hungry people and saw a problem. They saw nothing good coming from a hungry mob. But, Jesus' invitation to feed the thousands rather than send them away indicates that he looked at the same crowd and saw the possibility of a celebration. Thousands of hungry people were 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 and even our country embroiled in conflict 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 present turmoil, we trust God's promises that God sees fighting people, helpless bystanders, hungry people, sick 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 people from all backgrounds and countries will be sitting next to one another and **feasting in peace**. Yes, "nothing" is God's favorite material to work with.

Friends, far too often we function out of a perspective of **nothingness**. 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; people in nursing home beds who can't even recognize their own family members have something to teach us about God; people in ICU beds who can't speak because of ventilators in their mouths have something to teach us about God; people whose abilities are different from our own have something to teach us about God; people

whose gender identity is different from ours have something to teach us about God; and 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 is 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, 12 baskets full! Leftovers are the opposite of nothing!

Also, twelve is 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.

So, as I look at our present context, and think about the feeling of dislocation, the sense of exile, the sorrow, the hunger for community, and the sense of emptiness or nothingness we are experiencing, I remember that **NOTHING** is God's favorite material to work with! In fact, this God in whom we place our trust took the immense void, pain, sorrow, and grief filled **emptiness** created by a cross and turned it into a message of love beyond measure. When we see nothing, God gives us new eyes, a new heart, and a new mind to see "nothing" as something **new**! When we feel emptiness and we cannot see, God still sees something. Yes, God is so very present to us and, I do believe something new is being born! In fact, I am presently seeing a much **deeper** sense of community **growing** within our Faith community, growing among us as people. That is a sign that God is actively working in our lives at this very moment in time.

In just 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. 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!