

Nourishing dignity - celebrating all of life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 August 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 9A

**Genesis 32: 22-31; Contemporary Readings: “*Thirst*” by Mary Oliver
“*Meditation for a bad day*” by Bronwyn White; Matthew 14:13-21**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

A couple of years before I came to Pitt Street, Valwyn Edwards Wishart wrote a paper titled ‘*the silvering of the congregation*’ (referring rather glamorously to our fading hair colour) which addressed the needs and the contributions of older members of the congregation. Recently, the Church Council Community Group revisited the paper and decided to respond to one of Valwyn’s suggestions: to hold a service focused on older people. Today we have made sure that some people for whom travelling to church is now more difficult are able to be with us - and after morning tea there will be lunch for older people, their pastoral friends, and some others who have chosen to join in.

This year the Pastoral Care co-ordinators, have set up a programme of keeping in touch with people who are older in a more intentional way.

These steps are important. In our society, older people no longer live within extended families with adult children and grandchildren as they did in previous generations. They are more likely to live independently as couples, singles or friends with support from social service agencies when needed, or to live in assisted living situations like aged care homes.

Keeping connected, especially for people still living semi-independently is crucial to spiritual and mental well-being. There is much in our culture that would prefer that aging be out of sight. Aging bodies are regarded with distaste. People’s value is often linked to work, to what they produce. Doing is regarded more highly than being.

So today we are celebrating older adults and celebrating the seasons of all of our lives. For we are all growing older and if our lives take their natural course, most of us will face the challenges, and experience the gifts and graces, of aging.

Care, the practical expression of compassion, is central to being human. Clare, in her work as an aged care chaplain has told me of the way that residents where she works do not stop caring for each other just because they are the recipients of care. This is seen in simple things like enquiring how someone is when they know a person has not been well, or looking out for each other when the technology isn’t working as it should (because people in their nineties still need Netflix and the internet).

In this congregation, so much of the work of caring for our community and sustaining our church is undertaken by people whom we call retired but who are living busy and generous lives.

Care and compassion are at the heart of today's gospel reading, the story that we call the feeding of the five thousand.

It is the only miracle story told in all four gospels. There is no sermon in this story, no parable. It is a story full of activity. There are five thousand families. And there is action! Especially by Jesus. Jesus saw; he had compassion; he ordered; he took; he looked, blessed, broke, and gave.

Earlier, Jesus had healed the sick. Now it was late in the day, and the crowds had followed him on foot longer and further than had been anticipated. When mealtime comes, they discover that no one has anything to eat.

The disciples became concerned about the time and the need for the crowd to go buy food, but there is no mention of the crowd complaining about physical hunger.

The disciples may be genuinely concerned with dinner, but saying to Jesus "*send the crowds away*" (v. 15) makes it sound as if they are not concerned enough to get involved.

It is not surprising that they felt overwhelmed. The crowd is huge. The needs are impossible to meet.

Often, we respond to such challenges by losing any sense that we could make a difference, so we end up doing nothing - or saying silly things as NSW Premier Gladys Berjiklian did last week when she said that the homeless people camped in Martin Place make her feel '*completely uncomfortable*,' while suggesting that it was Lord Mayor Clover Moore's job to fix her discomfort by getting the homeless people to "*move on*."

If there had been, perhaps, six people following Jesus when it came time to eat, then a disciple might have thought there was something he or she could do, but a whole crowd of unmet need is overwhelming.

From the disciples' perspective, lacking the power of the NSW Premier or Minister of Housing, "*Send the crowds away*" may be a way of confessing powerlessness in the face of large-scale need, as well as getting the obvious need out of sight.

Jesus' response is a call to action. "*They need not go away; you give them something to eat*," he says (v. 16). The disciples are responsible for feeding the hungry, even if the size of the task is daunting. They want unmet need to go away, but Jesus responds by drawing nearer to it.

Most Bibles add a title to this story, something like "*Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand*." But Jesus gives food only to the disciples, who then feed the others. Our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus feeds the Twelve; the Twelve feed the five thousand.

"Now you are nourished, go and nourish others."

So, there's a question for us in this: *In what ways have we been given blessed nourishment and failed to pass it on to people in need?* It is a pastoral question, and it is also a mission question.

I think that there are two miracles in this story. The first is the miracle of abundant food (and I no longer think the point of the story is to try and work out how what actually happened). And the second is the miracle of human transformation toward compassion, care and generosity. The disciples move from sending people away to giving away what has been given to them.

There is another possible reason why the disciples were reluctant to act: they clearly thought that what they had was not enough. They focused on what they lacked rather than on doing something wonderful with what they did have.

In a society that prizes youth and achievement, the message to older people is often that they have nothing to offer, nothing that will nourish others. It is hard to hold onto a sense of worth and possibility in the face of this shaming and diminishing idea.

Joan Chittister has written, *"Age and limitations are no excuse for being a nonperson in a world that needs icons of truth and courage, vision and possibility as never before."* So if you are older and the thought of providing food for the masses is impossible, think instead about the gifts you do bring: the gift of wisdom and the gift time to reflect deeply on meaning, the gift of time simply to be.

When Jesus ordered the disciples to feed the crowd, they replied, *"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish"* (v. 17). While it is true that what they had was not very much, they chose to describe it as nothing.

It may be a small amount – we may have a small amount - but it is not nothing. It may have seemed not much in their eyes, but in the hands of Jesus, what is meagre is often turned into what is bountiful. Jesus is challenging the disciples to dream bigger, to change their ideas about their own power, their ability to work with what they've got.

Jesus did not say, *"Give me those fish and that bread, and I will feed the crowd."* He called on the disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world.

However old or young we are the call to *"Give them something to eat,"* is often met with a sense of powerlessness, and we turn away. If we think our baskets contain "nothing," when in fact we do have a few loaves and fish, then there will indeed be "nothing" with which to feed the hungry.

Barbara Brown Taylor says: God tells us, *"Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead."*

If we think we are too old and tired, if we internalise the societal message that worth decreases with age, we will not believe that the simplest acts of kindness can change the world. If we who are younger think we are too busy to connect with older people, vulnerable people or homeless people, we are forgetting the counter cultural nature of Jesus call that we are all responsible for the care and feeding of his people.

Biblical scholar Matt Skinner reflecting on this passage, says: *“to feed another person is to affirm human dignity. To feed people until they are full is to declare them replete with value.”*

He went on to pose a question about what a waiter would say to a roomful of anxious guests whose hunger can't be satisfied by promises alone. And he poses this response.

“I imagine Jesus would tell the waiters... to do more than just listen to people's orders and enliven the table with small talk. You have to give them something to eat.”

In other words, you get involved in the meal, you nourish and restore, you affirm the dignity of every person present. And when people can no longer do this, because of physical or mental capacity, it is the task of those of us who still can - to do everything we can to care and to affirm their dignity. In this way, we honour the image of God in every person. In this way, we remake our world.

This story can also shape how we see communion. When Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish, he blesses, breaks, and gives - in a way that foreshadows his last meal with his friends, and the communion we still celebrate today.

While the story's emphasis might seem to be a social gospel call to action, it is important to note that it is also tied to holy mystery. The foreshadowing of the Last Supper reminds us that Jesus was not just sponsoring a dinner.

This story is part of the great redemptive drama of God's activity in the world. The world is being reconciled to God, and the ministry of Jesus is always actively taking part in that story.

As we celebrate Holy Communion today, in a community of young and old and in-between, as our spirits are fed, words like eating, nourishment, human dignity, valuing one another, become the living promise and presence of the Sacred with us.

Miracle stories don't offer guarantees of instant gratification. They do however, tell us something about the nature of commonwealth of God on earth. They tell us about the splendour of human wholeness, the heart of God, and the shape of discipleship.

These words, this story, the bread of life and the cup of blessing, all beckon us to enter into a new way of being, and invite us to join in the work that Jesus began.

There is more than enough. The abundance of God knows no bounds.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We are human through relationships and food that nourish the body and nourish the spirit.