

***WHEN WE FEEL INADEQUATE: The Miracle of Emptiness***  
*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno June 17, 2018,*  
*based on Mark 6:30-44*

The ancient book of wisdom, the Tao Te Ching, says,

We join spokes together in a wheel,  
but it is the center hole  
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,  
but it is the inner space  
that makes it [a home]..

This morning I want to discuss the spiritual concept of emptiness. In today's scripture lesson Jesus had just sustained a great loss. His mentor, John the Baptist died. No, he didn't just die – he was executed for speaking truth to power; beheaded. It's a sobering moment, to say the least. Imagine how Jesus feels at that moment.

Jesus withdraws – he gathers himself in what Mark calls “an empty place.” This location is Mark's metaphor for what's going on inside of Jesus. The era of John the Baptist has passed. There's a natural leadership vacuum. It's Jesus's era now. What will he do?

The story about the 5000 hungry people shows up right here and it sounds more like a parable than an actual story to me. Here is how it is presented: Jesus stands before the whole world. Everyone is hungry and everyone is alone, “They are like sheep without a shepherd.” The disciples, speaking on behalf of all authority types, say, “Make them go away. Let them rummage around for themselves if they want something to eat. “

“No,” says Jesus, “**you** give them something to eat.” Their reaction is interesting and very telling.

“We have nothing . . . only five loaves and two fish,” they say, plaintively. There we hear it: It's the response of the ages when people feel overwhelmed by the world around them. They have something, but they are convinced it just isn't enough.

It is the response of the brand new non-traditional student who finds life on campus so strange and complex that he feels over his head.

It is the response of the spouse who is desperately trying to make peace in a troubled marriage, and who grows weary of feeling she is the only partner working on the relationship.

It is the response of the employee whose employer never has a kind or encouraging word. But how can you quit when there are few jobs out there in your field or your town?

It is the response all of us offer at times when life seems larger than the resources we think we have to deal with it. "We have no more than five loaves and two fish." What are we to do?

No, you don't need to go out and get more stuff. You don't need to go to WinCo or Costco and buy stuff. "Give them what you have," Jesus says.

Now, note that this is Mark's version of this mass feeding story. It is not Luke's story where a little boy offers a basket of provisions for the disciples to dip into. No, Mark has other fish to fry in this version, so to speak.

Jesus is asking the disciples (read: you and me) to give him all we have. He knows we are going to say, as we always do – "Hey we are inadequate." First let me go to graduate school. First let me poll my friends about this problem. Give me time to find some resources." No, Jesus is saying, offer up the little you have; empty yourself.

Twenty-six years ago Thomas Moore wrote a landmark book, CARE OF THE SOUL. I know that a few people in this church read the book at the time. Moore, a therapist, said he believed that too many people went to therapists and pharmacists looking for cures. If they had a feeling of malaise about their life they hurried to professionals or sought chemicals to "treat" the problem. In doing that, they failed to pay attention to what their heart, in distress, might have been trying to tell them.

Further, Moore said health professionals should be more interested in dispensing care instead of cure, as was true in the great medieval tradition where care for the soul was always a goal. What a refreshing word that is.

Ten years later Moore wrote a follow-up to that book. He's written other books along the way, but this was its first real sequel. It's about cultivating a profoundly spiritual life. There's such integrity to that. The best ideas come slowly, I think. They are gestated.

Moore urges us to cultivate spiritual emptiness. Here is how he puts it:

*Spiritual emptiness is not only an empty mind, but an empty self. We have to get ourselves out of the way – our explanations, our goals, our habits, our excuses, and our anxieties.*

*We often try to avoid disaster and try to fill life with order and meaning, but just as often, life unravels all our careful preparations. At that moment we can complain, but I have found it is best to go with the loss and be educated by it. The willingness to stand in our ignorance gives us character and keeps us honest.*

He goes on to tell the following story. Decades ago, the university where he had taught for seven years denied him tenure. “You’ve lost your zest for teaching,” said his department head. “And you don’t write in proper academic style.”

Rather than appeal the decision, Moore decided to read it as a sign to move on. But it wasn’t easy. There followed several years in the wilderness of self-doubt.

*Today people say to me, ‘You must be happy that they made such a mistake, and they must be sorry for it now.’ The truth is, they were right, and I still feel the sense of failure. It doesn’t seem right to claim victory or to distance myself from the pain. Celebrating victory can be a way of defending against the important and necessary loss. Deep emptiness lies in the vacant feeling you have when complaints and words of self-defense fall away.*

When something you value is required of you and you sustain a loss, how do you react? If you are like me you often say. “There’s been some mistake. I can’t get along in life without this person, without my livelihood.” Whatever -- you fill in the blank.

When asked to do something we feel inadequate to face, we often jump in the way and equivocate. Moore says that nothing will really work until we find it in ourselves to get our ego out of the way.

Hear the Tao Te Ching again, on getting out of our own way.

*Fill your bowl to the brim  
and it will spill.  
Keep sharpening your knife  
and it will blunt.  
Chase after money and security  
and your heart will never unclench.  
Care about people's approval  
and you will be their prisoner.*

*Do your work, then step back.  
[This is] the only path to serenity.*

Notice that in the gospel text Jesus does NOT say. "Go get 'em boys." No, Jesus is not Vince Lombardi. Jesus would make a lousy football coach.

No, he doesn't say, "Go get some training." He doesn't say, "Get a job that pays more." No, he says, "BRING THE LITTLE YOU HAVE TO ME." He calls for a general surrender, a spiritual emptying.

I find it interesting that the apostle Paul says that Jesus did this himself when he came to earth. Paul says that, "though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings" (Phil. 2:7).

"He emptied himself."

Moore continues: *And so at moments when I feel forced to surrender to events and the feelings stirring inside me, I try not to complain but rather understand that my willfulness and egotism are being emptied. The process, so difficult to appreciate and so painful to endure, is profoundly spiritual.*

He continues:

*If we persist in it we may discover that the self has no role in finding happiness and fulfillment and that we don't have to be somebody [special] in order to feel content.*

So the disciples give Jesus what they have. Five loaves and two fish, and then they get out of the way. Which, when you think about it, is very freeing. And at the end, they pick up twelve baskets of left-overs. Tell me, how did that happen?

One explanation is that once the disciples put up the little they had, it kick-started generosity in the crowds; it primed the pump, so to speak, and the bits of bread and sausage everyone was carrying came out into the daylight. Or perhaps it was a miracle. Or, as I said in the beginning, perhaps the story is a parable.

Regardless, Jesus' message is the same: "Hey," he says. "Life is short. Our resources are small. There is much hunger in the world. Hunger of all kinds. People who are enlightened know these things and they don't waste time making excuses, or being defensive, or worrying about whether they are spiritual enough or have enough faith. That stuff is just the self, getting in the way."

Jesus chose to operate NOT by requiring an MBA degree or a Masters of Social Work. No, instead he chose to teach his disciples on the job. He required a daily emptying of himself and others. Give the little you have today. Give it all. That kind of advice can be terrifying.

I read once of comedian, Woody Allen's, first year doing his own material on stage. He sickened of watching lesser comics misunderstanding his material so he decided to do it himself.

The first year on stage was hell, he said. On more than one occasion he was caught climbing out a window just before the show began. He was that terrified.

I had a loaves and fish lesson in faith years ago in a different church. It was connected with an annual rummage sale we did. The decision was made to give 70 certificates valued at \$25 to Hispanic families in the valley where we lived to use at the opening – a Thursday evening . Well, I did the math and decided that this idea meant that there would be nothing left for Friday and Saturday.

We entertained various ideas and pretty much decided what's done is done. Well, I came in Thursday evening and looked around and I saw that 55 Hispanic families were there – 55, with the best behaved children I'd ever seen; each child was blissfully carrying around one toy or game. It was . . . well, it was beautiful.

Yes, and by Saturday evening we had still made nearly \$2000, which was generally what we made every year, anyway. It all looked pretty skimpy to me on Wednesday but, like the loaves and fish, it was enough. No, it was more than enough.

A group of Eastern Star ladies came in on Monday to collect our leavings, One complained to me that they were a bit sorry they agreed to pick up. There was just too much left over she said – As I remember, it was at least 12 baskets full.

I guess I just need to get out of the way when it comes to the gospel. Because I tend to be like the disciples in the story . . .

“Let's not feed these people,” they say. “We're just enabling them – we'll make them welfare dependent. And we'll become codependent, as well. Handy rationalization, that. “We certainly don't want to contribute to their inability to help them help themselves?” we say, and it rings a bit hollow, like the arguments about immigrants today which more and more of us are seeing are morally bankrupt.

Remember that Jesus did not let the extraordinary loss of John the Baptist paralyze him. Instead it made him realize just how hungry the world was. I'm sure that initially, he found himself coming up empty. And then, out of his emptiness he accomplished miracles.

The disciples said, “Let's send the crowds away to attend to their own needs.” And Jesus said, “No, *you* give them something to eat.” Then the disciples said, “But we have nothing. Well, nothing but five loaves and two fish,” and Jesus said, “Bring the little you have to me.”

Mother Teresa once put it this way: "None of us can do great things," she said "but we can all do small things with great love."

Amen