

“JUST IMAGINE!”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Acts 2:42-47

Matthew 14:13-21

Oh, what a difference a few years makes! Our two scripture lessons today are accounts of events that take place not so many years apart, but oh what a difference we find in the way that two groups of people react to the needs of the world.

Consider first the reaction of the disciples that day on the hillside when thousands of people needed to be fed. What did they say? They told Jesus to send the people away to find something to eat. And Jesus' response? “You feed them. You give them something to eat.” You give them something to eat? What are you talking about Jesus, all we have is five loaves and four fish? In the face of impossible odds, they simply threw up their hands and couldn't see how it could be done.

Contrast that with the people of the early church that we read about in the second chapter of Acts. They too faced some insurmountable odds. They too were

called upon to care for more people than they could imagine. And yet, do you remember the beautiful words that were read that told us what they did?

Hear them again:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

(Acts 2:44-47 NRSV)

What made the difference? Why did the people of the early church react and give so differently than the disciples did that day on the hillside? I believe they did so because they had heard the end of the disciples’ story. They knew the miracle that Jesus wrought on that hillside. They knew that Jesus had taken those paltry few things – five loaves and two fish – and miraculously fed all of the thousands there that day – and that there were leftovers.

And they knew the other impossible things that had happened with him, most especially that he conquered the grave, and rose to eternal life.

And they also had received the gift Jesus promised – the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost – empowering them to be his partners in doing great, if not, impossible things. And so they embraced that power, and the early church was marked with incredible giving, tremendous togetherness, and unending praise.

What incredible stories for us to read as we embark on this two-week focus on stewardship, and as we prepare to make our financial pledges to the church for the year ahead. All of us have some choices to make in the next two weeks.

We'll have to choose, once again, how we think about what we have. Is it ours, or is it God's?

We'll have to choose whether or not we trust that if we give abundantly, we'll still have enough.

We'll have to choose, like those disciples, whether or not we believe that God can take what we offer and do amazing, even impossible things with it.

And we'll have to choose if we have the courage, like those early Christians, to give extravagantly, and with glad and generous hearts, for the cause of Christ.

I've told you before that this is one of my favorite times in the year for preaching, because I'm inviting you to experience joy – the joy of touching and helping other lives, and the joy of being a partner with God in amazing ways.

When I think about, whether in two weeks, our pledges will show that we've been like those timid disciples, or like those early Christians, I'm betting on the latter, because history has shown, that the people of this church – all of you – have given in abundance over the years, and still do.

We've done it when, like the disciples, we faced some pretty impossible situations. Nearly ten years ago now, when we looked around and realized our

Sunday School classrooms couldn't accommodate all who wanted to study the Word, we dreamed big and trusted God, and despite a national economy in crisis, decided to build the Wesley Wing. We dug deep and gave in abundance, and most of all, trusted that God would make a way – and oh, did He ever!

We've been enjoying that space for many years now, and lives are changed because of encounters with God's word there. And what's amazing is that we just paid off the loan for the Wesley Wing, three years in advance! Loaves and fishes – God made it happen!

Fast forward a few years from that, to that fateful Christmas Eve, when organ keys fell off while Sharon was playing, and we were faced with purchasing a new organ to the tune of over \$100,000. What did we do? We chose to believe that God could make a way, and we opened up our wallets and gave from what he had given us, and he made it happen, and what glorious joy we receive from that beautiful instrument and those gifted fingers that play it!

One other story came to mind as I read this week of a pastor who was bemoaning the fact that her church's parking lot would be blocked off for a year or

more due to construction of the town's library next door. She's really worried about what will happen with their church attendance.

Oh, when I read that, I thought back to our construction years when we were getting a whole new parking lot. We knew it was going to be a mess, there was no two ways about it. People would have to schlepp through dirt and mud and all sorts of things, and we were worried, too, that they wouldn't come. So we started this little thing called "The Knights in Shining Armour." You know them, for they greet you every Sunday as you come into the church from the parking lot. They started to meet an immediate need (through the construction) but have turned out to be an incredible blessing to us all. I can't tell you the number of times that new members tell me that being greeted in the parking lot by the "knights" was one of the things that drew them into our church. Loaves and fishes – God made it happen!

And it's not just impossible situations that God has made possible through our giving over the years. Everyday, in so many ways, we see how God has taken what we have given and made it enough and more.

Not too long from now, there will be, say, a Marine recruit, far from home for the first time, probably sore from basic training, and homesick beyond belief, because he knows that the family is gathering for Thanksgiving dinner – but he will take hold of a USO phone calling card, that our giving helped pay for, and for a few moments on the holiday have his heart warmed and his spirits lifted.

And not long after that, a college student, under pressure from paper deadlines and impending exams, will go to her mailbox in the dorm, and find out she has a package from us, filled with goodies. And in that moment her spirits will be lifted and the pressure will be eased, and she'll remember that we remember her and love her and are praying for her.

Along around Christmas, lots of people will feel the love from our giving. Children around the world will open up the shoeboxes we've filled and get things they desperately need, but more than that, know deep joy. Children whose parents are imprisoned will still have a Christmas because we gave to Angel Tree.

I could go on and on. In the summer, inner-city kids who struggle everyday living in the midst of terrible violence, find respite at Camp Pecometh for a week

because we help pay their fees. And people whose lives have been utterly devastated by hurricanes, turn and see a van marked UMCOR which will help them rebuild, and that van is there because we helped make it happen.

But it's not just "out there" that our giving matters. It's in here, as well. Just ask a person who hasn't been in church for years, what it's felt like to have found a home here in one of our Sunday School classes, a place where they learn more about, not only the love of Jesus, but the love of our church as well.

Or look at what our giving does in our worship. We sit in this glorious space with this beautiful stained glass window, a space that is kept up and maintained by our giving. We listen to beautiful music by our wonderful choirs, who we support with our money for the purchase of that music and funding the incredible staff.

The money we give to the Lord through this church has made it a place that so many people have heard a calling from God on their lives to ordained ministry – people just in the last fifteen years like Patty Frick, Brett Pinder, Carlos Reyes Rodriguez and Sarah Alphin.

And the money we give has enabled us to care for this building in such a way that it has become a community center, of sorts. Come in here on any given night and you'll see groups like the Scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous and Naranon and so many others. We're saying as we open our church to them that they matter. We care about their lives, and we want them to have a space to meet to care about themselves.

Oh, the list goes on forever. We have tried in every way possible to be that Acts 2 church, giving with "glad and generous hearts" to the work of the Lord. It's not always easy, and in fact, is sometimes difficult and always sacrificial. But it also is always a joy, because we're partnering with God for a better world!

Oh friends, if we have done those things and more in the past, just imagine how much more we can yet do in the future. The God who can take five loaves and four fish and feed thousands can do infinitely more with our gifts.

So that's what I'd like you to do in the next two weeks. As you pray about and prepare to make your pledge to the church for 2019, just imagine! Imagine the possibilities through your giving.

Let me tell you one more story to get you started. It's from a wonderful movie called "Mr. Holland's Opus." The movie starred Richard Dreyfus as a music teacher, and in one of the most dramatic scenes, he is talking to a girl who plays the clarinet, pretty badly, truth be told, although she wants more than anything to play it well. In their conversation, Mr. Dreyfus learns that she is from a family of overachievers, and she feels like a failure among them. She confesses to Mr. Holland that she's going to give up playing the clarinet, and says that if he knows anyone who needs her instrument, he should give it to them.

As she turns to walk away, he asks her, "Is it any fun?" With a shrug, she answers, "I wanted it to be." "Well, you know what we've been doing wrong?" he responds. "We've been playing the notes on the page."

Confused, she says back, "Well, what else is there to play?"

"There's a lot more to music than notes on a page. Playing music is supposed to be fun. It's about heart. It's about feelings and moving people and something beautiful and being alive and it's not about notes on a page. I could teach you notes on a page, I can't teach you that other stuff."

And so he takes away her music and tells her to try it. She tries it a time or two, each time coming to a point where she squeaked or squawked, and gave up.

She looks at Mr. Holland with tears in her eyes, and he tenderly asks her, “What do you like best about yourself?” With a shy smile, she responds, “My red hair – my Dad says it reminds him of a sunset.”

“Play the sunset,” he says. She closes her eyes, and begins to play – really play, not just the notes, but the music. She is so amazed, that in a moment, she opens her eyes and stops, and Mr. Holland says, “Keep playing!”

And so, on she plays, eyes closed, head beginning to sway with the rhythm of the music, and this time, it is filled with joy, and she’s having fun. (On-line, “Imagine That!” Mary Lewis, 5/11/01)

My dear friends in Christ! Giving to the church is not just about the notes on the page, the numbers, it’s about so much more than that – it’s about the joy. It’s

about the joy of partnering with God to do amazing things in our hurting world,
amazing things that will help us and help others.

I'll be praying for you as you ponder your pledge for 2019, and I'll hope you be
praying for me. May we choose to be, not like those timid disciples who could see
only their limitations, but may we choose to be like those early Christians, who gave
with glad and generous hearts and partnered with God to do some amazing things!
May it be so!

Amen.