

Sermon Series *One Thousand Gifts* Week 2 November 1, 2015

The apostles then rendezvoused with Jesus and reported on all that they had done and taught. Jesus said, "Come off by yourselves; let's take a break and get a little rest." For there was constant coming and going. They didn't even have time to eat. So they got in the boat and went off to a remote place by themselves. Someone saw them going and the word got around. From the surrounding towns people went out on foot, running, and got there ahead of them. When Jesus arrived, He saw this huge crowd. At the sight of them, His heart broke - like sheep with no shepherd they were. He went right to work teaching them. When His disciples thought this had gone on long enough - it was now quite late in the day - they interrupted: "We are a long way out in the country, and it's very late. Pronounce a benediction and send these folks off so they can get some supper." Jesus said, "You do it. Fix supper for them." They replied, "Are you serious? You want us to go spend a fortune on food for their supper?" But Jesus was quite serious. "How many loaves of bread do you have? Take an inventory." That didn't take long. "Five," they said, "plus two fish." Jesus got them all to sit down in groups of fifty or a hundred - they looked like a patchwork quilt of wildflowers spread out on the green grass! He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted His face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples, and the disciples in turn gave it to the people. Jesus did the same with the fish. They all ate their fill. The disciples gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. More than five thousand were at the supper. Mark 6:30-44  
*The Message Translation*

This beautiful miracle-story of feeding the 5,000 is a snapshot of the Kingdom of God... having already begun, and also still to come. (That's where we live: the Kingdom of God has begun and it's not yet here. Theologians call this living in the "already and the not yet." This miracle-story connects Jesus with the past, with our history as God's people, when God miraculously fed the Israelites in the desert, and the psalmist visualized God as the Good Shepherd, tending to all the needs of God's sheep. This story also connects Jesus to the future, to God's heavenly Kingdom, to the banquet table where we'll sit with Jesus, with all the saints, and all the company of heaven.

Here in Mark's terse writing-style is a snapshot of Christian discipleship, perhaps the "yin and yang," (the perfect balance) of Christianity. Jesus tended to the people's needs, body and soul, who had followed Him. He saw the crowds and had compassion on them; He sat with them, taught them, and listened to them. He was deeply concerned (Mark says His heart broke) over their soul-needs. And when everyone was hungry, Jesus took the little food the disciples had, and with it fed the multitudes. He was also truly concerned with people's body-needs.

This story of the feeding of the 5,000 is a snapshot of God's grace... God's unmerited care and love and compassion for us, God's unending gifts to us. The word "grace" comes from the word "eucharisteo" which means thanks-giving. Holy Communion is sometimes called the "Eucharist" or the "Great Thanksgiving." Joy is also a word derived from the word "eucharisteo." Before Jesus took the meager offering of five loaves of bread and two fish, He practiced "eucharisteo;" He gave thanks, and there was food enough for everyone, and still some left over. Jesus gave thanks, and God's gifts were multiplied, and there was - Oh joy! more than enough for everyone.

This month I'm preaching a sermon series and leading a study using the book, *One Thousand Gifts*. This is a story about thanks-giving "eucharisteo" as a way to see, to really notice, all of God's good gifts. Last week I said that I'd read this book *three times* because it so challenged my understanding of being thankful.

Ann Voskamp, the author of *One Thousand Gifts*, began to make a list of one thousand gifts as the result of a dare... and she found that noticing and being thankful for even the smallest gifts, changed her theology. Theology is simply the study of God, and it's something we all do - consciously or unconsciously - we think about what we know and believe about God. Ann's theology had been formed, as yours and mine has, by her life experiences, by what was taught to her, and by what was modeled for her. When Ann was four years old her little sister, a toddler, was run over and killed in the driveway of their farm, and after that, Ann's previously church-going family imploded from the pain. Ann writes about needing to practice thanks-giving, needing to find God in all circumstances, from her unresolved perspective of pain (and pain is our common human ground: we won't all tragically lose a child or a sibling, but we all know pain; we'll all experience disappointment, grief, and heartbreak.) Pain can shape us, as it shaped Ann's family, who quit going to church, and who struggled without their mother, who for a time was in a psychiatric hospital. Ann began to cut herself as a way to give a physical expression to her inner pain. Ann's story helped me stay with (and read, and reread) her book because she was looking - even before the challenge to keep a list of one thousand gifts - she was trying to find God in all things, even in senseless tragedy. It's been my lifelong struggle; to see God when things are not good or happy or hopeful... to see God, even in the darkness. Ann writes that how we find God in all things, is to thank God. This has been, for me, radical theology.

Ann and I travel on different paths, however, because of her belief that we are to give thanks to God for everything, because everything is caused by God. She quotes the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the early church from prison: "Rejoice in the Lord, always" and "In everything give thanks." For me, route is more circuitous: the challenge is to find God, in order to thank God, for being present, in all circumstances. I [really do] believe that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God is present with us, *always*, in all circumstances. Being thankful, counting gifts, has made me look for God with more intention, with clearer vision, with a more open mind, and with expectation that I will find God, in all circumstances. This is changing my worn-out, ragged, childhood theology that God only wants our happiness and well-being, and when we're not well or happy... it might mean that God has gone on vacation to a remote island, and is slathering on sunscreen, and reading a romance novel at the beach, and has left no contact information. In other (more succinct) words, my childhood theology was (without me really realizing it) that when tragedy and suffering and heartache happened... God was absent I've needed to count gifts, to practice "eucharisteo" because as I said last Sunday, I want more than my childhood faith taught me. I want joy. I want thanks-giving. I want to see Jesus... even in change, in uncertainty and fear... even in the darkness.

Last week the children handed out notebooks because I challenged all of us to record one thousand gifts, blessings, reasons to be thankful. I challenged us to practice thanks-giving by noticing, by counting, every gift from God. God speaks to us, through

these thousands of gifts, reminding us of God's love and delight in us, and in all creation. Our work as God's people is to notice, to appreciate, and to thank God.

Today is All Saint's Day; the day we remember and give thanks for those who have died, who are now part of the "great cloud of witnesses [of faith,]" who lived Christlike lives, and whose faith lives on in us. On your list of a thousand gifts, remember to add your saints, and give thanks for them.

[At the Table] Today we give thanks at the Lord's Table, where we remember that before all of His miracles, Jesus gave thanks. One of the miracles of counting gifts, of giving thanks, of noticing God's blessings, is to realize that our two hands cannot hold all of them. And we're not meant to. Counting our gifts, and practicing "euchaisteuo" somehow makes our hearts bigger, and makes us realize that we need to share our gifts.

Tuck that snapshot of Jesus feeding the 5,000, feeding them in body and soul, into your heart. This is the ministry Jesus calls each of us to: to find and feed - body and soul - all of God's people. At this table we are fed, nourished, filled with God's grace, to strengthen us for the ministry God has designed for us. At this Table we say, "Thank You Jesus!" for His love, and for His presence with us, in all circumstances. And at this Table we remember that even as Jesus gathered around a table with His friends for the last supper He'd share with them... He gave thanks.

Please look on page 4 of your bulletin and find the Celebration of Holy Communion and let's praise God for these gifts!

Pastor: The peace of Christ be with you all.

**Everyone: And also with you.**

*Please turn to those near you and offer these words of blessing: "The peace of Christ to you!"*

### The Great Thanksgiving

Pastor: The invitation is simple: come and eat of the feast. Not a meal to nourish the body, but to feed the soul. We receive the bread and wine connected to the ages: to the saint of old who felt unworthy, to the seeker eager to know God, to the teenager who wonders what it's all about, to the child who eats with unburdened faith. Woven into this time, the hopes and tears of generations. There is great joy here. No one is turned away for Christ is the host!

Worship Leader: Tender, transforming God, You have invited us to gather at this table...

**Everyone: To taste the feast, the same abundant promises offered to our ancestors in faith.**

Worship Leader: Time and time again You've offered Your grace...

**Everyone: Even as we have stepped away, You continue to call us to be Your people.** Worship Leader: You have never left us...

**Everyone: We praise You for second, third, and fourth chances. You are ever-patient, always faithful!**

Worship Leader: We give thanks for this time of celebration...

**Everyone: And for the One this meal remembers. For the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

Worship Leader: With those who have gone before us...

**Everyone: Whose hands touched the bread, whose lips embraced the cup, we worship You. We glorify You.**

Worship Leader: God of all, send Your Spirit to this place so that those gathered here, in this sacred moment, may know Your presence. As we eat the bread and drink of the cup, make us one with the saints, and with our sisters and brothers in faith around the world.

**Everyone: Be with us God, not only here but in every moment of our lives. Help us to know You. To be guided by the Holy Spirit. And to live Christ. Now and forever. Amen.**

Worship Leader: And now, as the children of God, let us pray together as our Lord has taught us.

**Everyone: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.**

Pastor: Gathered with His friends, Jesus took bread, broke it and said: "This is My body, broken for you. Take and eat." And pouring the cup, Jesus said, "This is My blood, spilled out for you, for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of Me." Almighty God, pour out Your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and cup. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world His body, redeemed by His blood. These are the gifts of God for the people of God!

*United Methodists practice an open table, which means that we recognize Jesus Christ as the Host of this meal. Christ welcomes to His Table all who desire to follow Him. Ushers will guide us to a Communion station in the front or back of the sanctuary; both offer a gluten-free option.*