

Sunday, July 29, 2018
 Lectionary 17
 10th Sunday after Pentecost

Listen

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

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*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable
 in your sight of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Amen

What is God saying to you? What is God saying to you?

Do you ever consider this question? I'm curious because so often we are saying things to God that I sometimes wonder if we are hearing what God is saying to us.

Perhaps it might be important to first consider how God is speaking to us before we talk about how and if we are listening to God. Does that make sense? Does it make sense that we should think about how God speaks to us, how God communicates with us, how God invites us?

Our gospel today is not just about the miracle of feeding 5000 people...but it's about the miracle of how God speaks to us, and when we listen...and how important it is to listen...and when we listen how we respond to what we hear God saying to us.

Close your eyes for a moment and picture 5000 men.

Picture 5000 men, because today's gospel only counted the men that were following Jesus. But tagging along were the spouses, the children, and an unknown number of additional females listening, following, wanting to know what it is that God is saying to them as well as to the 5000 others.

Both our Old Testament reading and our gospel reading today follow a very ancient formula of how God and people interact. It starts off with food being brought to that man of God, be at Elisha or Jesus. When you pay close attention there also is a specific amount of food brought...five loaves and two fishes in our Gospel. And immediately there's an objection that there is not enough. Even in ancient times this sense of scarcity of not enough grips people with such fear that even in the presence of a man of God...even in the presence of the messiah...it is not enough...it is not enough.

But what's interesting is in each case, in each case the man of God ignores the objection and the man of God does not even give the objection a moment's notice...but they instruct to the people to be distribute the food. They instruct that even in the deepest scarcity that the food be distributed, and it is...and there is enough.

The food is shared and there is enough.

Many people believe that this food that was shared, this miraculous multiplication of food wasn't so much done by Jesus...but the miracle is the generosity shown by the disciples and Jesus that encouraged a generosity that was much bigger than anyone could imagine. While the women were not given a number in our gospel they are very possibly the true source of the miracle in the story. One thing men never had to worry about in ancient times was where their meal was going to come from because they knew their wives and their mothers were going to make it.

These women that traveled alongside the men traveled with food - most likely enough for just them and their husband and children...and I don't think the desire to share one's food in the desert is all that high. But the witnessing of the generosity of Jesus Christ and his disciples sharing what little they had was enough to encourage other people to show generosity and encourage other people to look beyond the feeling of scarcity...beyond the feeling of not having enough...beyond the feeling of not feeling as though they could do anything....

And the real miracle here, the real miracle is that those that did not have enough listened and heard the voice of God to be generous to love one another to be people of faith to live like Jesus to live like the disciples and they shared their food. They shared out of there scarce amount of almost nothing and everybody ate and had everything.

There were even leftovers...there were even leftovers...because when God says to God's people to share...there is always enough.

What is God saying to you?

What is God saying to you, because when you can truly listen and hear for God you can do anything...you could perform any miraculous act of generosity when it comes from the voice of God.

It is not a secret that we are standing in a building that once knew scarcity...that we are part of a congregation who knows what scarcity means.

We knew what it meant to not have enough, and yet...and yet here we are...thriving...we may not see the abundance, but the abundance of God's grace is everywhere.

When St. Stephen's was at its lowest point, when we questioned whether we could turn on electricity or even open the doors the next Sunday...which predates me and predates many of us here...but it is our history...and when we were at that point of absolute scarcity...generosity flowed through our food ministries. The food pantry downstairs, that room in shambles still fed people when our future was not certain.

We may not have known it, but we heard and we sought out the voice of God to listen to what God was saying to us and out of nothing we gave everything...out of nothing we gave everything...and here we are about to embark on a massive transformation of our feeding ministry...here in this place. A massive transformation that isn't going to concern itself with giving food out but it's going to actually take on hunger and raise people out of poverty...but how do we do this?

We have to learn how to listen for the voice of God...we need to learn how to listen for the voice of God in scripture...within our congregation and one another...and within our community. We need to learn how to listen for the voice of God within scripture...within our congregation and one another...and within our community.

Months ago...before some of you were even here...we chose to embark on a journey. We chose to embark on a journey through the LEAD process, a journey that will teach us how to live every day as disciples by listening for the voice of God in our scripture, in our congregation, and in our community.

The first step in doing this was to create a team of people that were going to embark on this journey and to help lead everybody through it and that team is present with us...and the first action we took together was to present a survey to this congregation.

How many of you remember the survey or assessment you took?

It was an assessment that was used to help discover the perspectives of those of us who are here. It helps us to look at the current and future stakeholders of both those involved in ministry here and those that are affected by the ministry we do. The survey asked questions like: what is the most important way our congregation serves the community?

It gave options like: actively listening to local needs to identify and solve problems. Or by gathering volunteers to do service projects. Or by opening our building for others in the neighborhood to use. Or by financially supporting establish programs. And people selected the option they thought best and all the answers were tabulated and recorded.

One question that I really like was: what is the purpose of our congregation? Extending into the neighborhood, guiding important decisions and setting priorities. Or is it something we are working

to still define. Is it important but hard to put words to, or was that purpose establish years and years ago.

Any congregation going through this process takes the exact same assessment and through years of research the LEAD organization is able to tabulate the responses and place the church in one of four categories to help us begin a process of engaging scripture, each other and our community. In this we will develop skills and begin to hear God's voice calling us into mission and ministry.

It tells you where you fall in different quadrants. You could be considered a growing congregation where your purpose and your values are aligned with the outward vision that drives your ministry.

You could be considered as a becoming congregation where you are still seeking to identify where it is God is calling you in your own unique context. You could be considered out of breath where your purpose may no longer reflect what is happening around you and yet the effort to change might feel overwhelming. Or you could be considered a stalled congregation where your focus has turned inward leaving you disconnected from your local community.

Do you all have an assumption of where we may have fallen?

Based on all of our answers of all of what we were saying together in the survey St. Stephen's is considered a becoming congregation. Where we are seeking to identify where it is God is calling us in our own unique context. We are seeking to put words to our actions and to hear where it is God is inviting us to be...so when I ask the question what is God saying to you, I ask because I want to know what you are hearing. This is the deepest purposes of LEAD...to simply listen.

When we master the ability to listen to one another...to listen to God's voice...to listen to what God is calling us to do we learned something very important. When active listening is happening that means each and every one of us are being heard. From the least of these to the greatest each and every one is being heard. There's a fine line between listening and debating.

We may not individually agree with the answers to some of these questions that were given...but we need to listen so that we may hear what others feel differently than we do. For example, when we were asked about generations within our congregation we answer overwhelmingly in two different ways. About half of us said that we are interested in helping the generations get to know one another and the other half answered that we don't really do much because there are only a few generations represented. It is part of the LEAD team to uncover why these two answers - these two very different answers - we almost split 50/50.

The assessment shows us the opportunities we have...we can uncover why these answers are different and begin to build meaningful opportunities for all to be represented.

One of the other questions on the survey that really blew me away was when it asked about how people in our congregation feel. Overwhelmingly over 3/4 of the respondents said that people in our congregation feel open to exploring new opportunities but they're not quite sure how to go about making this happen. They feel open...but a number of people also answered that they feel like they need approval from committees or counsel before they can go off and explore new things. For me that was hard to hear, because I don't believe you need approval to explore your faith...but people feel that they need approval...how do we work with this?

There was also a response that people selected that they feel like nothing is going to ever change and things just are the way they are.

The world may seem like things just are the way they are. But you know what...it took one person out of 5000 people to decide 'the heck with things being just the way they are.' It took one person to stand up and listen closely to the words of Jesus and his disciples to decide that while others may be overcome with fear of scarcity...with what little that person had they began to share their food just as the disciples and Jesus were sharing their food. It took one, simply by listening for the voice of God, to decide that the world can be changed and that the kingdom of heaven is much closer than we realize.

But until we can truly listen and hear one another...we will never understand how we could encourage ourselves...let alone our community to see the world as something more than 'just the way things are.'

Robert Kennedy said "Some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream of things that never were and ask why not."

But until we can hear the voice of God within each other and within our community we will never understand how to help people realize their dream to say why not...why not a better city...why not an end to hunger...why not this place and these people stand up against poverty and say no no more.

I can safely dream of great things for this congregation and I can confidently say why not. Why not a vision of a pantry that offers healthy options that offers people an opportunity not just to eat but the opportunity to eat in a way that will prevent things like heart disease and cancer. I believe in a dream that we will develop a kitchen that doesn't feed us...that may never even feed us a scrap of food...but will be used to raise people out of poverty to feed the hungry to teach the struggling to give us the power...to give us the power to share out of scarcity and show a community...to show a city just what it is we are capable of doing.

Can you imagine what we will be capable of when we learn how to deeply listen, how to deeply listen to the voice of God in our scripture, in our church, and our community. In that depth of

listening...in that depth of listening each and every one of us will be given the opportunity to be heard

What is it that God is saying to you?

Together, let's find out what God is saying in our scripture, in our congregation, and in our community.