

**A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 14:13-21.**

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

<sup>15</sup> As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

<sup>16</sup> Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

<sup>17</sup> "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

<sup>18</sup> "Bring them here to me," he said. <sup>19</sup> And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. <sup>20</sup> They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. <sup>21</sup> The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

The show opens in a work-house, where orphan boys between the ages of eight and fifteen line up to be fed their daily portion of gruel, each of them wishing for something more. That was the big offense that spiraled out of control for young Oliver. He wanted more.

From that moment on, Oliver is sold to an undertaker to become a slave apprentice. He runs away to London in the middle of the night. It is here, in the bustling, sooty, smoky city of Victorian London, that he meets the Artful Dodger, a boy his same age who earns a living by pick pocketing on the streets.

Dodger introduces him to his way of life and leads him back to their hide away among the rundown and vacant warehouses where he meets Fagin, the elderly crook, a former pickpocket himself, who runs the kitchen and teaches the trades for the loosely associated group of boys who roam the streets practicing and perfecting their craft of stealing and pick-pocketing. Oliver joins the gang in order to put food in his stomach and clothes on his back.

There are a number of sub-plots to this story – a web of dysfunctional society, fear, domestic violence, condescension between economic classes, mistaken identify and, ultimately, finding and claiming family and home.

In 1959 Lionel Bart began work on the songs and story for the musical, *Oliver!*, based on Charles Dickens famous book, “*Oliver Twist.*” To Mr. Bart’s dismay, no theatre would touch it because, with its tale of orphans and poverty and childhood slavery and hunger, it was considered too ‘downbeat’. No one will want to see such a dark story of loneliness and youth gangs that shows domestic violence, murder, greed and prejudice. But, eventually, one producer agreed to bring the musical to the stage on a very small, shoestring budget.

Now, let me stop right there. We know a thing or two about working on a shoestring budget, don’t we? This old building, a place we love, a place that holds our memories and history, this building is held together by the ingenious solutions of volunteers who set priorities every day about what can be done and what will have to wait. So it’s a good thing that our ministry is not the building. Our ministry is about the outreach and the fellowship and the mission and the community – all of which we do on a shoestring budget.

Jesus also knew a thing or two about working on a shoestring budget, too, didn’t he? “We have five loaves and two fish,” he said as he counted the food that had been pulled together by the disciples. The crowd that day was in the thousands – 4,000 or maybe 5,000. And our budget for feeding that crowd? “Five loaves and two fish.” I cannot imagine any scenario where that will be enough. Yet, it is.

Jesus says, don’t count what you don’t have, pull together what you have among you. Start there. Never underestimate the power of what you already have.

After months of hard work and years of saving, the day came for Ray and Jackie to open their own restaurant. All that was needed was the final health inspection and the issuing of their business permit. That was scheduled for first thing that morning; then “Our Place,” as they called their restaurant would be in business.

But that morning the winds and rains of Hurricane Hugo hit, unexpectedly making its way 200 miles inland to their North Carolina town. Trees were uprooted, power lines were down, homes and stores were destroyed. Ray and Jackie hurried to their restaurant. Everything was intact. A huge relief.

A deputy sheriff pulled up and told them that their restaurant, the fire station next door and a service station down the road were the only places that had electricity. Ray and Jackie called the health inspector to come immediately so they could open, but because of the power outage, he couldn't get into his office to issue the permit. No permit means no business opening. With a refrigerator stocked with 300 pounds of bacon and beef and bushels of tomatoes, lettuce and bread, there was only one thing to do: give the food away.

They told the deputy, "Tell your coworkers and other emergency people you see that we'll have free BLT's and coffee for anybody who wants to drop by." Soon firefighters, police officers, telephone repair people and other workers were filing into Our Place. When the couple heard that another restaurant was scalping people by charging ten dollars for two eggs, toast and bacon, they placed a sign in their window: FREE BLT'S--FREE COFFEE. Families, travelers and street people were welcomed.

Then something began to happen. People started to clean counters and sweep the floors. Volunteers took over the dish washing from Jackie and helped Ray at the grill. Hearing about what was going on at Our Place from the local radio station, people from a neighboring town that had not been too badly hit by the storm brought food from their freezers. Stores and dairies sent over chicken, milk and foodstuffs of all kinds.

And so the long day went. Those first cups of coffee and BLT's somehow stretched to 16,000 meals. The restaurant's small stock increased by 500 loaves of bread, cases of mayonnaise, 350 pots of coffee and bushels of produce.

Jesus says, don't count what you don't have, pull together what you have among you. Start there. Never underestimate the power of what you already have.

The US Department of Agriculture reported that 16.2 million kids in America struggle with hunger. 1 in 5 American children go to bed hungry. And we know that summertime is especially hard since school lunches are not available for children who need them. 27 million people received food from Feeding America food pantries last year.

You can't learn in school on an empty stomach. You can't pass the test if you can't concentrate. It's hard to stay focused, if you don't know where you will get food tonight.

This isn't a secret or a mystery or even a profound truth. It is what the real news, the reality of life for millions of neighbors. When you are on a subsistence living, the ability to have food and to eat nutritious meals makes the difference between having the stamina to face the world or not.

Even Jesus knew that, when the people are hungry, they are not going to hear the good news. That's why Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "You need to give them something to eat."

Even if it's pretty meager -- five loaves and two fish. It was probably wrapped in paper, pulled out of someone's coat pocket. But then again, this is the church -- we have always been asked to do more with less, have we not? You have to start somewhere.

Yet feeding people isn't the final goal of ministry is it? This is not a one-time act that absolves you of responsibility for the rest of your life. The next step is ending the poverty that underlies the hunger; then we have to end the discrimination that breeds such poverty. And, along the way, another miracle occurs, we have built community, making a hodge-podge family where none existed, building

bonds with and for one another. That's the goal of ministry – being in relationship with one another and building us all up together.

Sometimes we underestimate our own contribution and the contribution of others. We label our elders as "has beens," not realizing the rich resource of wisdom their stories can give us. We dismiss our current circumstances, thinking the grass will always be greener in another place, job, relationship, or church. We underestimate our gifts and ourselves.

But what if, within the limits of our situations, within the gifts and abilities of people around us, within our own life stories and family heritage, there were untold riches, untapped resources of wisdom, energy, and inspiration? Then, the message of both the musical "Oliver!" and the story of feeding the 5,000 becomes a story of what happens when you take the change from your pockets and God does something with it. God can always do more with less.

It's why our Noisy Offerings are so effective. In the three year's we have been making our almost weekly offering of coins and small bills, we have donated over \$4,000 to ministries and nonprofit organizations all over the globe who are doing the work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, protecting and defending the abused and making our community a little bit more of a community.

It's why a picnic and watermelon bust in the front yard next Saturday holds so much promise as a day of community and fun and food. And what's not to love about free hot dogs.

This is one of the themes from "Oliver!" that has always resonated with me – that answer to the question: "Where do you find community?" "Whom do you consider family?" and "Who feeds whom?"

For "Oliver!," he trusts most everyone he meets – he trusts the Artful Dodger who has brought him into a group of belonging, a place to sleep and a meal each day; he trusts Fagin even though he asks Oliver to steal, he also tells Oliver to "Be Back Soon," a farewell that Oliver will be missed until he returns; he trusts Nancy who tries to return Oliver to his blood-line family and have a better life and ultimately is killed for her plan to do so.

Despite the fact that all of these people have very, very little by means of material wealth or social stability, they give what they can, they give what they have. They feed each other. They are not perfect people – they are in fact all criminals – but, like us and like Oliver, they pray to God for love to find them.

Jesus says, don't count what you don't have, pull together what you have among you. Start there. Never underestimate the power of what you already have.

Open your home. Offer your box of cereal or can of soup. Start with what you have and use it to be the miracle in the world. Others will join you. Live as if love were the renewable resource that it is.

Oliver knew that. He knew that no matter who you are or where you have been on life's journey, there is a place of love and community, there is a place of acceptance and welcome, there is a place of abundance and extravagance for you – and that place is the love of God. Always and ever more.

Amen.