

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 8, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 14: 13-33

"So You Think You have Nothing?"

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

He's standing on a bridge during a terrible snow storm preparing to jump to his death in the rushing water below. It's the pivotal scene in "It's A Wonderful Life." George Bailey never got the education, travel and adventure for which he had yearned. Instead, he sacrificed his dreams and remained in Bedford Falls where he ran the Building and Loan that stood beside the average hard-working family and stood up against the greedy, heartless slumlord, Henry Potter. It was not be the life he anticipated and one Christmas Eve he begins to doubt his life had any worth at all.

Unknowingly, his Uncle Billy allows an \$8,000 deposit to land in the villainous Potter's hands, who knows that the loss of the money will result in bankruptcy for the Building and Loan and criminal charges for George. With a bank examiner present and Potter arranging to have a warrant sworn out for his arrest for bank fraud, George comes to think like the disciples in today's gospel, "I've got nothing." But he was wrong.

After his encounter with one of God's angels, George goes home to face the authorities waiting to arrest him. But soon they are joined by a flood of townspeople and a basket full of donations enough to save George and the Building and Loan. In the right, loving hands, "nothing" can become something that is more than enough

It was suppose to have been a day away ---- A day to grieve the death of John the Baptist and the oppressive brutality of the powerful and prideful Herod. But when they arrived in their place of retreat, there was a multitude waiting for Jesus and he had compassion for them. It was getting late in the day and, in their own concern for the crowd, the disciples suggest Jesus send them away to find food. Jesus says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing." "We have nothing here BUT five loaves and two fish." But they were wrong. Jesus said, "give me your nothing five loaves and two fish." They give him their "nothing" and there was enough for over 5,000 to be filled, with leftovers.

There are those days when we, too, think, "Lord, I've got nothing." Those times when the problems in our community and world seem beyond anything we can do. "Lord, I've nothing" to feed the thousands starving... to protect those caught in the rage of terrorist or the epidemics of disease or poverty." There are times when the amount of money or the hours in a day don't match the demands. "Lord, I've nothing," nothing left to give my kids,

my spouse, my job, the church, those in need.” There are those times when we hear Jesus say, “Go tell others about me.... Bring the children to me..... spread my word to the ends of the earth.... continue my work of healing, teaching, feeding, restoring, including, loving.” We think, we panic. “Lord, we’ve got nothing” but good intentions, limited budgets and lots of fears: fear of risk, fear of offending others, fear of not knowing what to say or do, fear of failure or rejection, fear we won’t have enough if something unexpected happens, fear of being foolish.”

Still Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” We say, “Lord, we’ve got nothing.” Jesus says, give me your nothing. Give me your fears, the overwhelming pains of the world, your battle with limited resources, the church struggling to remain relevant and uncertain of how to reach others, your five loaves and two fishes. Jesus takes and blesses what we freely give and gives it back to us to share, like he did with those disciples on the hillside. And though it may not be exactly what we imagined, it is enough to do God’s work. It’s not magic or a powerball payoff. It’s just what God is good at... what God has always been good at. Remember long ago when out of the chaos of formless voids and dankness, God said “Let there be light...Night and Day...land separated from sky... creatures in the air, waters and on the land... man and woman made in our image ... and it was so and it was good. In the love and power of God’s hands, our nothing offered to help God’s children and world will become something that can make a difference. That’s the power God offers us, even with our little faith and sinking doubts.

In the summer of 1959, Robert Hill was a 13-year-old boy living in Italy. His father was a sergeant in the United States Army stationed there. Robert had just read of Dr. Albert Schweitzer's humanitarian works in Africa and he wanted to help him. Robert had only enough money to buy one bottle of aspirin. He did not even have enough money to mail it to the doctor. But Robert wrote a letter to the Commander of the Air Force in Italy asking if "one of your planes" could just drop the bottle at the hospital. The Commander, touched by Robert's letter, passed it on to an Italian radio station. The station broadcast Robert's letter. Soon thousands wanted to give to Dr. Schweitzer's work. In July 1959, Robert Hill flew to Africa with four and a half tons of medical supplies worth more than \$400,000, carried in planes provided by the French and Italian governments. Dr. Schweitzer remarked: "I never thought a child could do so much for my hospital." “All I have is one bottle of aspirin,” Robert said. “Give it to me,” Jesus said. He took it, blessed it and gave it back to Robert, the armed forces stationed in Italy, the people who heard of Robert’s bottle of aspirin for Schweitzer’s hospital in the Belgian Congo.... and there was 4-1/2 tons of medical supplies.¹

Tony Campolo, pastor and professor, is known for being rather blunt in his preaching and teaching. He was invited to speak about missionary work during a World Day of Prayer service. A woman leading the meeting announced to those gathered that she had a prayer request from a missionary in Venezuela. The missionary was a doctor who had given her life to serve the poor in the barrios of Caracas. She needed \$5,000 to put an addition onto her medical dispensary. The addition was desperately needed to make it possible to handle all the sick and infirmed who were coming. The leader of the group then asked Dr. Campolo, "Would you please lead us in prayer that the Lord might provide the five thousand dollars that is needed by our sister in Venezuela?"

Before he could catch himself, Campolo said, "No! You already have all the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room. What I will do is take all the money I am carrying on me and put it on the altar. And I'm going to ask everyone else here to do the same. No need to write out checks! We'll only accept cash! After we've all put the cash we're carrying on the altar, we'll count it. Then I'll ask God to write out a check for the difference."

Campolo only had \$2.25 in his wallet and pocket but he put it all out on the altar. The leader smiled benevolently and said, "We've all gotten the point, haven't we?"

He responded, "No! I don't think we have! My \$2.25 is on the altar. Now it's your turn!" Though somewhat taken aback by the aggressiveness of his request, she opened her wallet and pulled out \$110 and slapped it down on top of his meager offer. Then he said, "We're on our way! We've got \$112.25. Now it's your turn!"

Campolo pointed to a woman who was sitting in the front pew. She looked around and smiled a bit. Then she got up and came to the altar and put her cash on top of theirs. He got the next woman to do it, then the next. It took him more than 25 minutes to take up the offering as one by one, woman after woman came and placed her money on the communion table. When they had finished, they counted it. They had taken in more than eight thousand dollars. With no time left to preach, Campolo remarked. "Why should we ask God for five thousand dollars when He had already provided us with more than eight thousand dollars." He then offered a prayer of thanks to God for freeing them to be generous with what God had already provided.²

What crazy-good dreams do you think God has for Haven? To fill our Sunday School classes with children who learn about Jesus love? To find ways to give more teens and young adults a no-judgement zone to experience the love of God? Do you sense God calling us to get out in the community and be more open about our love of God? Do you feel God wanting us to bring more folks into this community to worship

and serve our Lord? “But Lord, we don’t know how... we worship a little under 100 a week ...many of us are getting older... it’s a tough world out there.... We’re afraid. We’ve got nothing — but these five loaves and two fishes.” Today’s gospel reminds us that it is not just about what we have or do not have, who we are or are not. ---- It is who GOD is and what GOD can do **in** us and **through** us that is the point and truth.

Will we dare to give what we have to Jesus and receive the “more than enough” he gives us in return to serve his beloved children and creation? It’s fearless discipleship, stepping out of the boat in faith and believing that even if we begin to sink, Jesus will be there to lift us up to try another day. “Feed them.” “Give me your nothing.” Jesus say, “ You will have more than enough to make a difference, change lives and be blessed.” Believe it! It’s the gospel truth! Amen

Linda M Alessandri 2/7/15

ENDNOTES

1. King Duncan “You Feed Them!” Collected Sermons 0-000-0000-20

2.Campolo, Tony Let Me Tell You A Story Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000 pp153-154