**Where To Sit?**

**John 6:1-14**

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July 29, 2018

The reading today is a story that most of us are familiar with. The feeding of the five thousand. This miracle is so powerful and easy to relate to that it’s one of Jesus’ actions that even non-Christians are familiar with it. There is a shortage of food, and out of only five loaves and two fish, Jesus creates an abundance. We can all relate to the idea of God providing abundance out of a shortage. This story is so important that it’s the only miracle included in all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. On the surface the story is easy enough to understand, even when something seems impossibly scarce, God creates an abundance.

Now we need to remember the story of this miracle was originally told by storytellers. It wasn’t written down until a generation after the time of Jesus. This is one of the beauties of Scripture. It was originally an oral tradition, and through time, it was polished in the telling and retelling so that every word carries meaning, every sentence adds to the nuance of our understanding of who God is, and what our relationship is to God.

Have many of you ever sat around the campfire and told stories? I’m sure you know a good story teller who has a way of drawing people into the story. They make the story just so. In order to make it good, they don’t add things that aren’t important. Because if they do, it’ll confuse the story. In the same way, they have to make sure they add all the important information. Otherwise, the listeners won’t understand the point the story is trying to make That’s what great storytellers do, and the Gospel writers are great storytellers. They were telling the amazing story of Jesus Christ. In the oral tradition, which is what Scripture started as, every word matters.

John’s description of Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 is perfect. Our story begins with Jesus trying to get away from the people that were following him. He wants a break, and he figures if he goes across the lake, he can get some rest. But no luck, the people follow him. So Jesus goes up into the mountains, and the people still chase him. Here we have our setting. Jesus wants to rest, but he is surrounded by people who are clamoring for him to give them a sign of the coming of the new kingdom of God.

Matthew and Mark both make a point of describing the place where Jesus is as deserted. A place with nothing. They are clear that this is an isolated area. I’ve been hiking in the Rocky Mountains and I know what that can be like. You walk a great distance, and sometimes it can be difficult to find places to rest. The ground is usually rocky and uneven. The open spaces are small and it can be hard to find places to put a large group of people. Jesus has really tried to make it hard for people to follow him. He wanted to get away. Instead of staying on the beach, he’s taking them to a place that is uncomfortable.

So we have this desert place’ this place isolated from the community. A place without much going for it. A place where food is not going to be easy to find, if possible at all. This is the setting of today’s reading.

And yet…. John writes this as Jesus prepares to perform the miracle of feeding the people. John 6:10 *Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.*

Did you catch it? Did you find the words John carefully placed in his story? John makes a point of saying there was grass in this deserted place. In this difficult place, the place Jesus tried to escape to, in this place that should have been rocky and barren, the place Mark and Matthew called deserted, this place lacking resources to feed people, there was grass.

So what? Why is this important? Why does John make a point of letting us know about the grass?

Remember, these people who have followed Jesus have worked hard to be where they are. They have trailed Him across the Sea of Galilee, followed him up into the mountains, to a rocky place without resources for feeding themselves. They have cast aside any idea of comfort or pleasure just to be with Jesus. They have committed to placing themselves in a difficult situation. They have given up any hope of being comfortable.

And God was already preparing a place for them. The grass was already there. When we only look at the feeding of the 5,000, and ignore the rest of that story, we miss the sign that God was already at work, preparing the setting, putting things in place for the miracle to happen.

That is the beauty of this story that we miss because we don’t have an oral tradition anymore. We miss the key element that before the miracle happed, God was already at work. Before any of the people arrived, God had already prepared the setting. Why is this important for us today?

Because there are so many places where we say it’s impossible to change things, it’s impossible for it to be different. We write off places and events as being deserted and unfixable. We call problems too rocky and uneven to smooth out. But God is already at work, in the deserted places, the grass is already there waiting for the miracle to take place.

When we see the homeless people sleeping in the streets and on the porch of the downtown church, we think the problem is hopeless, but God has already planted grass there, waiting for the kingdom of God to get in gear and provide everyone with food and shelter. The people making sandwiches on Fridays, and handing them out on Saturday are blades of grass preparing for the miracle when there are no more hungry or homeless.

We read stories about the problems in public schools, especially in urban areas like Detroit and Chicago, and it’s tempting to toss up our hands and say the problem can’t be fixed, and yet there are volunteer tutors and support programs are being set up to give those children a chance. Giving them a chance to reach beyond the limitations imposed upon them, and a chance for the grass grow up through that rocky soil.

We see the racism that has reared its ugly head again in recent days, and we despair that all the hard-fought gains of civil rights that came in the last 70 years have been for naught, yet the grass continues to grow and the soon, the miracle of the next era of justice will happen. The era of the Kingdom of God where for all people will love and respect one another.

In recent years we have seen what happens when the grass breaks up the rocky soil, and provides the setting for change. It was only a year ago that we saw what happens when the blades of grass testify to the need for a miracle. A little phrase changed the way society looks at the concept of sexual abuse and harassment, #metoo. That little phrase was the tipping point in forcing a national dialog on what are appropriate ways to treat women.

Before that, another phrase was the key to a national dialogue. This one on how police treat one of the most oppressed segments of our population. The words Black Lives Matter sprung up, like blades of grass, it grew across our country, and our eyes were opened as to what had been going on for decades upon decades. The grass cried out, and the people woke up,

Now I’m not saying that all of the situations are resolved, we are far far from being to a place where harassment and abuse to segments of our society aren’t happening, We are a long long way from claiming that the Kingdom of God is totally in place but I’m saying we have taken a huge leap forward in redefining what is acceptable and unacceptable in our society. The grass has broken through the soil, and it needs to keep on spreading.

The grass needs to keep on spreading as we struggle with issues like immigration reform, income inequality, health care distribution, and all other places where we could make the claim that injustice exists. I know in some places the soil is rocky, and the land is deserted, but even in those places the grass is growing. God’s justice is at work, and the setting for the miracle is being prepared.

Which brings us all the way back around to us here at FUMC. So often for a lot of people, the world in general feels like a dry, deserted, lonely place. People wonder around looking for a place to rest, their load is heavy and they’re feet are hurting, they’re looking for a place to belong, a place for a miracle to happen in their lives. I’ll tell you want they’re looking for; they are looking for some grass to sit on and rest. In the world, the church is the grass, and we, FUMC, are called to be grass in Ann Arbor and the surrounding areas. We are called to be the place where people can come to rest, to be renewed and refreshed. To be uplifted and feed. A place where we can take off our heavy packs, we catch our breath. We can sit in the grass and prepare to be feed the bread of life.

And once we catch our breath, we can get our supply of grass seed and start to plant it. That way we can go back out into the world, and we can toss grass seed in the places we go. We can fight for God’s justice; we can demonstrate our love for our neighbor. We can help God’s grassy places get bigger, and more frequent, and we build the kingdom of God together.

Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Can you smell it, the wonderful smell of the grass as the cool breeze blows through it? Can you feel the softness of the grass under your feet as you walk, the way it cushions you as you sit down to rest? Maybe you even want to stretch out and take a nap on the soft lush grass. Some people will tell you that the world is a deserted place, a barren place, but we know otherwise, the grass is there and that is the sign that God is doing something miraculous. Amen!