

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Viki Brooks

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

June 26, 2022

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

It is a joy to be among you again this morning. It encourages me to be a part of an in-person gathering. We clocked another year of distancing, masks and virus reporting. I am sure our weariness about this disease is shared, even if our wariness about its impact is varied. May we find reason to celebrate our time together in life affirming ways.

Session, the governing body of this congregation, began discussing this year's theme back in November. On everyone's mind was the reality of the pandemic as well as the fractured political scene. We were trying to discern how to faithfully ponder what we hoped would be a post pandemic question of what comes next? To some extent our discussions were buoyed by the hopeful projections of news pundits as well as the shifting trajectory of Covid. We all sensed that a comprehension of community, in its many forms and definitions, might hold an antidote to the ailments of isolation that lingered.

And then, in the early months of this year, Russia launched an attack on Ukraine. A war involving a nation capable of nuclear engagement took hold of that part of the world. In addition, by May 2022, the United States had experienced over 250 mass shootings. Violence of a different sort yet still shocking. These facts seemed the antithesis of healing and a long way from our notions of community.

Session never revisited our agreed-upon theme. We never asked if our theme might be a bit pollyanna given what was happening around us. We never even hinted at a change of direction for the summer. I am not sure if this was a conscious avoidance of revisiting a decision or simply the exercise of denial of our current situation. Or maybe it was indicative of an even deeper longing to affirm our place in the elusive concept called community. But, as one of the major influencers over the agenda for our meetings, I kept the course. We all did. And, here we are. What is the meaning of community? Where is community amidst the scars of a pandemic and the violence we observe in governance, school yards, grocery stores and Ukraine?

They told me in seminary that textual guidance is a great starting point for reflections broad and deep enough to move us beyond the personal. Since I paid them a lot for my preparation for ministry, I tend to heed that advice. So let's turn to this morning's text. The story of the loaves and the fishes, or the feeding of the 5,000, grounds our inquiry in a specific event in the life of Jesus.

The imagery of this text is varied and multidimensional. If you hear in the words of this reading a faint hint of the words we repeat at our communion table you would be correct. Blessed, broke and gave are the verbs of our table of thanksgiving as well as this wilderness story. There are wisps of the formative story of the people of Israel, harkening back to Moses and his wandering throng of that day. A time when God provided manna for the exiled Hebrews. A little more obscure are allusions to Elisha's miraculous provision of food for a militia of men with baskets of food left over after all had been fed. There is in this small tale of our Lord, a full compliment of references pointing to the many ways God is at work in the world as our Savior. These tiny rehearsals of specific acts is a reminder of God's saving throughout history.

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This narrative concerning the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is the only such pericope captured by each of the four Gospel writers. Let me say that a bit differently. Despite the range of years, experience and perspective of each of the compilers of the four Gospels, all of them valued this particular story enough to include it in their record of the life of Jesus. It is an essential description but perhaps not for what we might think at first glimpse. It is not the miracle of feeding so many given so few ingredients, but rather the creation of a community from a motley crew of followers. A creation that is a mark of God in our midst.

Where do your experiences and allegiances to community begin? Are they geographic? Often when I describe this congregation and my involvement in it, I talk about Rensselaerville as a place where summer is as much a verb as a noun. Where many members summer in this quaint enclave of Albany County while the other seasons find them at other residences. Then there are those for whom the geographic ties to this community are mitigated by a strong identification with the nation of their birth. Geographical community seems to be a fluid definition around here or at least multidextrous.

Community as a group with shared interests might offer a serviceable definition. Conkling Hall appears, to this outsider, a vibrant community center where historic interest in community safety, arts and history is reflected in current events and programs. Perhaps for some of you that is a community to which you have a sense of belonging?

And here, in this gathering, surely there is a sense of community? Is it geography, history, interest? I hope so. But I would like to suggest there is something more.

Returning to today's Gospel, there is a story that precedes it, at least in the Gospel of Matthew, that I think is important. The folk who followed Jesus to this quiet place, to his hoped-for place of retreat, were outcasts and worse they were in danger. There was news afoot that Herod Antipas wanted Jesus killed. He feared Jesus as he had John the Baptist who was killed during one of Herod's parties for the political insiders and the powerful. The Baptist was killed for the threat he posed to the established and wealthy. Herod placed Jesus in the same camp. And those who followed Jesus, to this wilderness hill side, were dangerous in the minds of those who ruled.

While observing his followers, people endangered simply by association with Jesus's ministry, the author of Matthew says Jesus had compassion for them. He did not ask from where people came as he healed them. He did not look for any ideological similarities before he handed out bread and bits of fish. He had compassion for them. A simple and loving foundation stone for the creation of this particular community.

I am sure many of you have experienced that entrance to communities does not always begin with compassion. Many factors determine our entrance to geographical communities. When my childhood neighborhood became a possible residence for four houses filled with Shakespearean actors, my neighbors organized in order to keep them away. Later in high school while working for a justice group in Cleveland, I learned that their efforts to abolish redlining, the practice of denying mortgages to people of color, were nonexistent in my community. It was considered an impossible task in my lily-white hometown and not worth the effort. Joining geographical communities offers some roadblocks that seem the antithesis to compassion. Not everyone has a place.

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Communities of shared interest have a similar history of denying various categories of people entrance to their clan. Involving women in volunteer fire departments is a relatively new inclusion. We were not considered appropriate additions to the work of fighting fires. Golf clubs, yacht clubs and bowling leagues, arguably, hold several explicit and implicit standards for belonging. Some communities do not hold a place for those they perceive as different.

Spiritual communities, such as churches, are not exempt from these practices. Our denominational arguments about sexual orientation are far too fresh for me to forget the ways we used scripture to bludgeon anyone who saw the issue of inclusion for LGBTQ folk differently. We keep people from our communion tables based upon delineations of acceptable beliefs. None of these practices start with compassion while sending the message to some that is no place for them.

Jesus looked at the crowd with compassion. The Greek word found here, *esplanchenisthe*, (es-plag-ness) is often translated as pity. That is a flat definition. Instead this word captures the presence of God's healing in our recovery from injury or alienation. It is the word used in the story of the Good Samaritan. This traveler understands the situation of the man at the side of the road. He would die without intervention. The response is first one of understanding and then one of action. In our story for today, Jesus understands the hunger and vulnerability of the crowd and he acts to save them from their current affliction. There is in the use of this word a presumption of divinity. God is present in the exchange that causes understanding and action. Jesus saw them with compassion.

In 2013 Congressman John Lewis offered the commencement speech at Union College. I am sure many of you know of this man. He marched with Martin Luther King and sustained many injuries in his nonviolent protests during the civil rights marches. He went on to serve Georgia in the House of Representatives for over 33 years, dying at age 80 in 2020. I was honored to meet him as we waited for the various rituals and formalities to unfold for graduation ceremonies. But more than that, I was moved. This man's patience, his quiet and receptive persona, was inspiring. In a brief encounter, I knew this was a man who had nurtured his practice of compassion far beyond many people I have met. His words to graduates that day were a call to unity that cut through platitudes so common in commencement addresses. He called upon graduates to cultivate peace born of understanding and act for justice from that understanding. His call to unity included a quote from Martin Luther King, paraphrased here: We must learn to live as brothers and sisters or we shall perish as fools. His message was a call to action where there is a place at the table for everyone.

This summer as we participate with the thoughts offered by our various preachers, it is my hope that we can form a compassionate starting point. I hope that our understanding of community, in its most global sense, offers everyone a place at the table.

During the session meetings where this theme was fine-tuned, we also explored ways to enhance and expand our experience of this community. The topic of membership occupied a line in our agenda for several months. The result is an invitation to all who enter these doors and experience the place for them at our table, to join us. These printed cards are available at the door of the sanctuary. On them you will find three ways we wish to celebrate your place among us and welcome you into our community. First is a full and formal joining of the Presbyterian Church. The second is an affiliate membership. These are the traditional categories of our particular flavor of church bureaucracy. The session has added a third choice. We are calling this category a community membership. It is a step into community that does not require adherence to our creeds but extends a hand of welcome to the tables of this congregation: our worship table, our coffee-hour table and our

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luncheon tables. If you are interested in accepting any of these invitations, and discussing some of their particulars, please let me or Sue Miller know.

We are, by nature, a communal people. As our Hebrew scripture this morning affirms, we are stronger in our attachments than we are as solitary beings. I seriously doubt there is a person in this room that has not suffered from the divisions we experienced over the last 2 years. One step toward our salvation, toward the healing God has to offer, is to view our individual and cooperate experiences with compassion and understanding and then, and only then, we devise an action plan to bring us out of the divisiveness that seems to rule the day. To paraphrase the Martin Luther King phrase shared earlier: We need to learn to live together as persons in a shared community or we will languish as fools in alienation.

AMEN