

SERMON: Simple Gifts

TEXT: John 6:1-13

If this were a true Taize worship service, you would not hear a sermon. But, no such luck today!

With the songs we have sung so far this morning, you may have already noticed that the tunes are simple and the words are few. With repetition, memorization comes easily, and the song becomes a meditative prayer. Almost like a chant, the music fills our whole being, allows space for God to speak to us, and quiets us to help us listen. As we become immersed in song, we become closer to unity with God.

It is both simple and powerful.

The music known as Taize began with a man known as Brother Roger. He and his sister, Genevieve, were living in France when World War II began. The small village of Taize was quite close to the demarcation line dividing France in two, and it became a place which attracted many war refugees. Feeling called by God to create a community of rest and reconciliation, Brother Roger and his sister

obtained a house with several outlying buildings, and they began to shelter refugees there, including Jews.

There was no running water and food was a simple soup. Out of respect for the Jews, Brother Roger often went away from the house into the woods to sing and pray.

In 1942, they were told that their activities had been found out and they were in danger. Brother Roger went to Geneva and began a community of brothers. They all returned to Taize in 1944. Genevieve also returned and became a mother to several children who had lost parents in the war. On Easter Day in 1949 seven brothers committed themselves together for a life of celibacy and in great simplicity.

The story we read from the Gospel of John, of Jesus feeding the five thousand, at first glance doesn't seem like a simple story at all. Even with all of our modern conveniences today, we would have trouble feeding a hundred people. So think about what a daunting scene it was two thousand years ago, to be faced with a crowd of – not just five thousand, (that was just the men) – but more accurately, over ten thousand hungry people, on a hillside, far from town. Even if

they were in town, what market would have enough to feed this many? If the disciples were not panicked enough, then they heard Jesus ask Philip: “Where are we to buy enough bread for these people to eat?” Of course, Jesus already knew the answer; he was just testing Philip. Philip answered, “Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” Logically, there was no way they could feed this crowd.

The impossibility of the task was so clear that it seemed ridiculous for Andrew to speak up about a boy who had five loaves and two fish. He knew how foolish it sounded right as he said it, so he countered himself before his friends beat him to it: “But what are they among so many people?”

Jesus, however, apparently didn’t think it was so foolish. Jesus saw possibility and potential in a little boy and his simple gift of bread and fish. Jesus saw abundance in the face of scarcity. Jesus saw generosity and faithfulness in a climate of insecurity and fear.

Jesus instructed the disciples to have the people sit down. Then he gave a prayer of thanks and began to pass around the loaves and the fish. It says here that they had “as much as they wanted.” Mothers weren’t eating less so their children

could have more. People weren't being careful with only a bite or two. There was no pinching a tiny piece off the loaf like we do when we break from the communion bread. They all had as much as they wanted. And "when they were satisfied," comfortable, relaxed, like you are when you've had a good meal, Jesus told the disciples to gather up fragments left over. Leftovers! Let's see five loaves and two fish divided by ten thousand people. Now, math is not my strong suit, but my calculations don't show a remainder! In fact, it just plain doesn't add up. They had leftovers! Twelve baskets full!

Whatever happened here was not simple. Or was it? Jesus is the Son of God, after all. He may be 100 percent human, but he's also 100 percent divine, so feeding a few people, or a few thousand, no problem. He turned water into wine; he can turn a little food into a lot of food. Easy peasy.

In fact, it's almost too easy. I mean, I believe in miracles. But I think we also have to be careful about *depending* on miracles. Seeing what Jesus can do makes me want to lean back in my chair and put my feet up and wait for him to fix everything while I take a nap. You know as well as I do, that's not the message we're supposed to get.

In my last church we had several people who enjoyed participating in an event that started out being called, Kids Against Hunger. As it grew, it came to be known as the Meals-a-Million Pack-a-thon. Anyone ten years old and up could help. With just a few simple instructions, we gathered in groups of 7 or 8 and formed an assembly-line of sorts around a table. In a quart-sized Ziploc bag, we put a scoop of rice, soy, dried vegetables, and vitamin powder. Then the bag was weighed, heat sealed, and packed in boxes that would be shipped to hungry people around the world. When the contents of the bag was added to hot water, these simple ingredients provided a tasty and highly nutritious meal that would feed 4-6 people. Along with a number of other volunteers in a small warehouse, we packed 13,600 bags in two hours. Assuming six servings per bag, we helped to feed 81,600 people. IN. TWO. HOURS.

Sometimes we make things harder than they need to be. To the little boy who offered his five loaves and two fish, he knew people were hungry, so he shared his food. Why not? Clearly, he hadn't grown up enough to learn all the reasons why not. It's possible his parents could have thought of several reasons why not. It's also possible that all the adults in that crowd had some food to share but too many reasons not to.

So instead of multiplying the food, perhaps Jesus multiplied the generosity of the crowd through the SIMPLE GIFTS of a little boy. Perhaps the miracle was not about feeding thousands, but about how Jesus released thousands of people from their fear of scarcity and opened their hearts to realize the freedom of abundance. As physical hunger was satisfied, I imagine spirits were filled with the contentment and joy of connection and unity and interdependence. Jesus taught this community a simple lesson about sharing. The kind of lesson we learn in the first years of our lives, and sometimes, sadly *unlearn* as we grow older... and less carefree... and more fearful.

Someone once suggested to me that all the problems in our world come down to one deadly sin: GREED. We all want more. More money, more love, more power, more everything. And if others get less as we get more, well, it just means that we're smarter, we worked harder, we won the competition. Survival of the fittest. You win some, you lose some. That's the way it works. That's the name of the game.

Immediately following this story in John, we learn that "Jesus withdrew to the mountain by himself." People were realizing who he was; they became intent upon making him king. It would have been tempting for any of us. It had to be

tempting for Jesus. Which is why he often withdrew from the crowds to spend quiet time in prayer and meditation. To keep himself grounded. To connect with God and be reminded of his purpose and God's call upon his life. To remember that the only thing worth being greedy for was to reach more and more people with God's unselfish and unconditional love.

Our SIMPLE GIFTS offered up to the Lord can satisfy the deepest hungers of the world. May it be so, to the glory of God!

AMEN.