

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
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Matthew 14:13-21

Who and What Was Transformed?

Within our culture we can find acts of selfless generosity and mentalities of scarcity. Perhaps one comes from compassion and the other from fear. I think there are times within each one of us when we have experienced both—feelings of generosity in which we can give without expecting reward and times of having feelings of fear in which we hold our possessions close. We are all human and one feeling doesn't make us angels and the other doesn't make us devils. So much of what we feel about the abundance or scarcity of life is a result of the times in which we live, the families in which we grew up, what we see and how we view the world around us.

In the midst of our thoughts and discussions about stewardship, here in church and around our kitchen tables, I'm sure we all have mixed feelings about giving and keeping. We have experiences from the past and hopes, or perhaps, fears for the future. The people in the wilderness with Jesus that day the five thousand were fed probably were having similar feelings, hopes, and doubts of their own. The disciples who were close to Jesus, too, had feelings of scarcity and fear mixed with their hope in following Jesus. Jesus, too, probably had mixed feelings. He had recently heard that John the Baptist had been executed by a selfish and silly king. Jesus was tired and hurt and must have been wondering what God was leading him to do. He just wanted to get away from the crowd, from the disciples—get away from it all. So he took off on his own, to a deserted place, we are told. Deserted places were wilderness places, like the one he had been in before when he was tempted by the Tempter with all kinds of worldly power and wealth.

In that deserted place, with all that bearing down on them, with Jesus, the disciples, the crowds, and five loaves of bread and two fish, who or what do you think was transformed? From what place in their lives and hearts and beings did Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd act and react? Where did transformation come from and where did it lead them?

Let's all stop for a moment and think about a couple of times in our lives. Let's think about or remember a time in our life when we were really scared about the future. Perhaps we were facing a career crisis, perhaps a financial

crisis, perhaps a health crisis, or maybe a relationship crisis. What feelings did you have within? How did you react to the pain and uncertainty? How did you treat those people around you? How did you view strangers? What were your thoughts about where you were headed? What did you do? What got you through it? Or, what about the time you helped someone get out of a jam? Or, the time you sacrificed something you wanted to possess or wanted to do and instead helped a out friend or family member who was in need, in crisis, who was having a tough time? Perhaps you gave generously of your time or resources? Perhaps you decided to visit them rather than do that chore at home or go out on town. How did your selfless, generous, compassionate act make you feel? What do we learn from lean and scarce times and compassionate or generous actions?

Jesus could have told the folks to leave him alone. He could have passed the crowd by and hidden himself from them better. He could have reserved his compassion for another time. Yet, he chose the road of compassion and generosity instead and inspired thousands by his simple act of generosity that day on the hillside. His transformation from seeking solitude to sharing compassion and food transformed thousands that day and billions in the future.

The disciples from their fear and perhaps concern about falling short of expectations believed it better to send people away to fend for themselves rather than disappoint so many. They balked when Jesus asked them to share what they had with the crowd. But, eventually, they experienced some kind of hope, and saw the compassion in Jesus eyes. They overcame their fear and generously shared the little they had with the crowd.

The crowd, desperate from their hard lives under Roman rule, from making ends meet in a tough economy, from oppression and discrimination by a unwanted occupier followed Jesus even into the wilderness. When they saw the compassion, strength, and hope in Jesus' eyes as he blessed the meager amounts of bread and fish, when they saw Jesus' disciples start passing out the small amount of food they possessed among the crowd they checked their bags and began to do the same with the little food they had brought with them. And, they shared, they gave of themselves.

I think the real transformation that day in the wilderness wasn't the loaves and fish that seemed to mysteriously multiply. No, the real transformation was in Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd. Compassion and generosity and hope transformed a crowd of five thousand that day to billions of people down throughout history who had the courage to start Christian churches all over the

world. Forty-some people, who believed in reaching out and welcoming people in slavery into the full life of this culture had the compassion, generosity, and hope to start Maple Street Church and they gave birth to generations of loving, compassionate, and generous people. You, Maple Street congregation, are the legacy of that generosity, compassion, and welcome.

Believe in Jesus Christ. Believe in acts of compassion, generosity, and welcome. Let go of fear. Believe in yourself. Hope for the future. Be transformed and transforming. Amen.

