

WHEN WE FEEL INADEQUATE: The Miracle of Emptiness
a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno July 18, 2021,
based on Mark 6:30-44

The ancient book of wisdom, the Tao Te Ching, says,

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it [a home].

This morning I want to discuss the spiritual concept of emptiness. In today's scripture lesson Jesus has just sustained a great loss. Word comes that his mentor, John the Baptist is dead; executed for speaking truth to power; In fact, he was beheaded. It's a sobering moment, to say the least. Imagine how Jesus feels.

Jesus withdraws – he gathers himself in what Mark calls “an empty place.” This location is Mark's metaphor for what's going on inside of Jesus. The era of John the Baptist has passed. There's a leadership vacuum. What will Jesus do?

The story about the 5000 hungry people shows up right here and it sounds more like a parable than an actual story to me. Here's how it is presented: Jesus stands before the whole world. Everyone is hungry and everyone is essentially alone. And we get this remarkable image from Mark – it's pure poetry: He says that in Jesus's eyes the world's people “are like sheep without a shepherd.”

This is his opening gambit.

His disciples are not in on what a moment this is for the world. They're uncomfortable with crowds, so they say, “Make them go away. Let them rummage around for themselves if they want something to eat. “

“No,” says Jesus, “**you** give them something to eat.” He's not going to be around long. It's soon going to be up to his followers to make a go of this new enterprise.

The reaction of these fledgling 12 is interesting and very telling.

"We have nothing . . . only five loaves and two fish," they say, plaintively. It's the stereotypical response of the ages. They have something, but they are convinced it just isn't enough.

We all feel this way at times. It is the response of the bright, brand new, "non-traditional" student who finds life on campus so strange and complex that he feels over his head.

Or the spouse who is desperately trying to make peace in a troubled marriage, and who grows weary of feeling she is the only partner working on the relationship.

It's the response of the employee whose employer never has a kind or an encouraging word. But how can you quit when there are few jobs out there in your field in your town?

It is the response of all of us at times when life seems larger than the resources we think we have to deal with it. "We have no more than five loaves and two fish." What are we to do?

No, you don't need to go out and get more stuff, says Jesus. You don't need to go to WinCo or Costco and over-buy. "Just give the hungry ones the little you have," Jesus says.

Now, note that this is Mark's version of this mass feeding story. It is not Luke's story where a little boy offers a basket of provisions for the disciples to dip into. No, Mark has other fish to fry in this version, so to speak.

Jesus is asking the disciples (read: you and me) to give them something from what we have. He knows we are going to say, as we always do – "Hey, we are inadequate." First let me go to graduate school. First let me poll my friends about this problem. Give me time to find some resources." No, Jesus is saying, offer up the little you have now; empty yourself.

Almost 30 years ago. Thomas Moore wrote a landmark book, CARE OF THE SOUL. You may remember it. Moore, a therapist, said he believed that too many people go to therapists and physicians looking for cures. If they have a feeling of malaise about their life, they too often hurry to professionals or seek chemicals to "treat" their problems. In doing that, they fail to pay attention to what their heart, in distress, might be trying to tell them.

Further, Moore says, health professionals should be more interested in dispensing care instead of cure, as was true in the great medieval tradition where care for the soul was always a goal. What a refreshing word that was.

Ten years later Moore wrote a follow-up to that book. It's about cultivating a profoundly spiritual life. He didn't write a second book quickly, based on the success of the first. No, he took his time. There's such integrity to that. The best ideas come slowly, I think. They are gestated.

Moore urges us to cultivate spiritual emptiness. Here is how he puts it:
Spiritual emptiness is not only an empty mind, but an empty self. We have to get ourselves out of the way – our explanations, our goals, our habits, our excuses, and our anxieties.

We often try to avoid disaster and try to fill life with order and meaning, but just as often, life unravels all our careful preparations. At that moment we are often moved to complain, but I have found it is best to go with the loss and be educated by it. The willingness to stand in our ignorance builds character and keeps us honest.

He goes on to tell the following story. Decades ago, the university where he had taught for seven years denied him tenure. "You've lost your zest for teaching," said his department head. "And you don't write in proper academic style."

Rather than appeal the decision, Moore decided to read it as a sign to move on. But it wasn't easy. There followed several years of wandering in the wilderness of self-doubt.

Today people say to me, 'You must be happy that they made such a mistake, and they must be sorry for it now.' The truth is, they were right, and I still feel the sense of failure. It doesn't seem right to claim victory or to distance myself from the pain. Celebrating victory can be a way of defending against the important and necessary loss. Deep emptiness lies in the vacant feeling you have when complaints and words of self-defense fall away.

When you find yourself undervalued by another – a boss, a spouse, a parent, how do you react? If you are like me you often say. "There's been some mistake. I can't get along in life without this person's approval, or without this particular job." You know, whatever it is -- fill in the blank.

But maybe the moment calls for us to take a time-out. To take honest stock of what we have to offer – not over-sell it, nor under-sell it. Just accept it for what it is.

Moore says that nothing will really workout in life until we find it in ourselves to get our ego out of the way.

Hear the Tao Te Ching again, on getting out of our own way.

*Fill your bowl to the brim
and it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife
and it will blunt.
Chase after money and security
and your heart will never unclench.*

*Care about people's approval
and you will be their prisoner.*

*Do your work, then step back.
[This is] the only path to serenity.*

Notice that in the gospel text Jesus does NOT say, "Go get 'em boys." No, Jesus is not Vince Lombardi. Jesus would make a lousy football coach.

And no, he doesn't say, "Go get some training." He doesn't say, "Get a job that pays more." No, he says, "BRING THE LITTLE YOU HAVE TO ME." He calls for a general surrender, a spiritual emptying.

I find it interesting that the apostle Paul says that Jesus did this himself when he came to earth. Paul says that, "though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings" (Phil. 2:7).

"He emptied himself."

Moore continues: *And so at moments when I feel forced to surrender to events and the feelings stirring inside me, I try not to complain but rather understand that my willfulness and egotism are being emptied. The process, so difficult to appreciate and so painful to endure, is profoundly spiritual.*

He continues:

If we persist in it we may discover that the self has no role in finding happiness and fulfillment and that we don't have to be somebody [special] in order to feel content.

So the disciples give Jesus what they have. Five loaves and two fish, and then they get out of the way. Which, when you think about it, is very freeing. And at the end, they pick up twelve baskets of left-overs.

Tell me, how did that happen?

One classic explanation for this is that once the disciples put up the little they had, it kick-started generosity in the crowds; it primed the pump, so to speak, and the bits of bread and sausage everyone was carrying came out into the daylight. Or perhaps it was a miracle. Or, as I said in the beginning, maybe the story is a parable.

Regardless, Jesus' message is the same: "Hey," he says. "Life is short. Our resources are small. There is much hunger in the world. Hunger of all kinds. People who are enlightened know these things and they don't waste time making excuses, or being defensive, or worrying about whether they are spiritual enough or have enough faith. That stuff is just the self, getting in the way."

Jesus chose to operate NOT by requiring an MBA degree or a Masters of Social Work from his disciples. No, instead he chose to teach his disciples on the job.

He required a daily emptying of himself and others. Give the little you have today. Give it all. That kind of advice can be terrifying.

I read once of the comedian Woody Allen's first year doing his own material on stage. He sickened of watching lesser comics perform his material badly, so he decided to do it himself.

The first year on stage was hell, he said. On more than one occasion he was caught climbing out a window just before the show began. He was that terrified.

I had a loaves and fish lesson in faith years ago in a different church. It was connected with an annual rummage sale we did. The decision was made to give 70 certificates valued at \$25 each to Hispanic families in the Rogue valley where our church was, to use at the opening of our sale – which was a Thursday evening. Well, I did the math and decided that this idea meant that there would be nothing left for Friday and Saturday.

We entertained various ideas and pretty much decided what's done is done. Well, I came in Thursday evening and looked around and I saw that about 50 Hispanic families – 50, with the best behaved children I'd ever seen; each child was blissfully carrying around one toy or game. It was . . . well, it was beautiful.

Yes, and by Saturday evening we had still made nearly \$2000, which was generally what we made every year, anyway. It all looked pretty skimpy to me on Wednesday but, like the loaves and fish, it was enough. No, it was more than enough.

A group of Eastern Star ladies came in on Monday to collect our leavings, One complained to me that they were a bit sorry they agreed to pick up. There was just too much left over she said – As I remember, it was at least 12 baskets full.

I guess I just need to get out of the way when it comes to the gospel. Because I tend to be like the disciples in the story ...

“Let’s not feed these people,” they say. “We’re just enabling them – we’ll make them welfare dependent. And we’ll become codependent, as well. Handy rationalization, that.

“We certainly don’t want to contribute to their inability to help them help themselves?” we say, and it rings a bit hollow, like the arguments about immigrants today which more and more of us are seeing are bankrupt since businesses, small and large, cannot find enough employees to fully staff themselves.

Remember that Jesus did not let the extraordinary loss of John the Baptist paralyze him. Instead it made him realize just how hungry the world was. I’m sure that initially, he found himself coming up empty. And then, out of his emptiness he accomplished something remarkable.

The disciples said, “Let’s send the crowds away to attend to their own needs.” And Jesus said, “No, *you* give them something to eat.”

Then the disciples said, “But we have nothing. Well, nothing but five loaves and two fish,” and Jesus said, “Bring the little you have to me.”

A few Sundays ago I quoted Mother Teresa to you on this same subject. Let me repeat her words: She said, “None of us can do great things, but we can all do small things with great love.”

Amen