

Where Is Our Focus?

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Matthew 15.10-12, 16-20

My great-aunt Gladys wanted my great-Uncle Arthur to take her shopping one day. Uncle Arthur felt like he was coming down with a cold, so before he drove Aunt Gladys to the department store, he took a shot of Nyquil.

Well, that apparently relaxed him quite a bit, because at the store they got onto an elevator with another man.

Uncle Arthur asked the man, "Can I smell your feet?" The poor man indignantly replied, "Certainly not!"

Uncle Arthur said, "then it must be your breath."

Of course, the problem wasn't the Nyquil that went into Uncle Arthur, but the rude comments that came out of him.

Today's Gospel reading is actually very interesting, but to get the full impact of it, we need to back up just one chapter. In chapter 14, we see Jesus feeding five thousand people. He'll later repeat the experience for four thousand people. The story of feeding the multitude links the ministry of Jesus with the sacred history of his people and with the truth of God's universal presence.

In the wilderness, after escaping from slavery, the Israelites were miraculously fed with manna. Manna literally means, "What is it?" but when the people found the flaky stuff on the ground, they discovered it was edible, plentiful, and that it showed up daily...whatever it was.

In their moment of need, it seemed like a miracle, like bread from heaven. In reality, it was probably a secretion from a desert plant or insect, but nevertheless, they found it when they needed it and though they didn't know what it was, they learned that it could sustain them. In their experience, it was a miracle of divine provision.

Later, in the book of 2 Kings, Elijah's disciple Elisha feeds 100 people with only a few barley loaves. Not only was every person fed, there was even bread left over. Now, the story said there were 20 loaves, and we don't know how big they were. But the miracle was the bread was shared and in the sharing, abundance was experienced.

In all four of the gospels, the miracle of divine provision is repeated. The provision always came during tough times. Divine provision doesn't mean that times are always easy; it just means even when things aren't easy there is a way...a way out, or a way over, or a way through.

You may be lost in the desert, but even the desert provides something edible.

You may be a hungry, but then a prophet comes a long and encourages someone to share, and in the sharing needs somehow get met.

And once again Jesus shows this...a lot of people in chapter 14 are tired and hungry, and Jesus tells his disciples to feed them. The disciples protest, saying, "we only have 5 loaves and a couple of fish," and Jesus said, "Just share what you have." And miraculously, everyone got fed.

I've commented before that I believe when the disciples shared what they had, other people began doing the same. Of course five rolls and a couple of sardines won't feed five thousand people, but when the disciples gave what they could, someone else remembered that she had some dates, and someone else remembered he had a bit of smoked meat, and someone else had an apple, and everyone started to share what they had and suddenly there was enough food for everyone.

No single offering would have been enough, but when everyone shared willingly, there was more than enough. That's the miracle of divine provision...even when times are tough, there is a way.

Following that story, there is the story of Jesus walking on water. That story may be more allegorical than historical, but it does again show the power of divine provision.

In the story, Jesus walks on water toward his disciples who are in a boat during a storm. They are afraid, but Peter takes a chance and walks out to Jesus on the water. Once he realizes what he's done, Peter starts to sink and cries out for help. Immediately, the story says, Jesus reached out and caught him, and then chastised him for losing faith.

What the story tells us isn't that once upon a time Peter defied the laws of nature for a second and a half; the story tells us that when life is stormy and overwhelming, and it does get stormy and overwhelming, we can do more than we thought we could, if only for a moment.

When we stay focused on possibilities, we accomplish great things. When we focus on fear, we start to sink and the circumstances control us rather than us navigating the circumstances. The story shows us the contrasting power of hope and fear...fear pulls us down while hope lifts us up.

Finally, chapter 14 ends with a very short story about Jesus healing a lot of people in Gennesaret. Well, actually, Jesus doesn't heal anyone. The story says that all the sick people in the area were brought to him, and all who touched his cloak were healed. They had to come forward. They had to reach out. They had to take the chance. But when they did, they were healed.

That's why we come forward for prayer each week. Yes, God is everywhere...we don't have to come forward because God is stubbornly up here refusing to budge. We come forward as an act of faith, as a sign of our willingness to take charge of our own lives, as a symbol that we are reaching out to the power that is always available to us. Jesus never forced healing on anyone, but he taught them how they could participate in their own healing. Miracles don't hunt us down, but they respond to us when we reach out for them!

And those are the stories that lead up to Matthew 15.

In chapter 14 Jesus has demonstrated the power of sharing, the power of stepping out in faith, and the power of reaching out to seize the healing possibilities in life.

And these three stories of powerful demonstration, of how divine provision can be accessed in the moment of need, lead us into chapter 15.

And following Jesus' incredible successes, what do we find? Religious leaders complaining that he doesn't follow their tradition closely enough!

Do you think the people healed in Gennesaret cared whether or not Jesus washed his hands? When Jesus comes to his friends on the boat in the middle of a storm, do you think they cared whether or not he had eaten some shrimp or bacon? When Jesus was making sure hungry people got fed, do you think those folks cared how traditionally he interpreted any given verse of scripture?

Jesus is living in, demonstrating, and sharing the power of God and instead of rejoicing over the good he's doing, the religious establishment is complaining that he isn't doing things their way.

When people complain to me that we aren't Catholic enough or Baptist enough or Mormon enough or Pentecostal enough, I sometimes challenge them by saying, "Please don't be mad at the people who want you for not being the people who don't."

Joy, peace, and power don't come from legalistic observance of tradition; joy, peace, and power come from what we think and how we feel and WE are in charge of that!

The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and if those things are negative, then our experience will be negative.

Every Sunday, we crowd around this altar, and we pray, and how do we end our prayers? With positive affirmations. We affirm our Good. We affirm hope. We affirm gladness. We affirm gratitude. We affirm blessings. Because what comes out of us is where our focus is, and where we focus is where we'll end up. We focus on the good by affirming the good choosing for good to flow from us so that good will return to us.

I saw Patrick Stewart the other day on television. Not too long ago he took up race car driving so he could drive in races for charity. And what he discovered was so profound...his first time out, he hit the wall. He saw it coming and he just kept looking at that wall and sure enough he crashed right into it. But the next time out, he didn't look at the wall, he looked at where he wanted to be, and he then he didn't hit the wall. He wound up where he wanted to be.

The lesson, he said, was the driver must look to where he or she wants to go, not to where he or she is afraid to go, because wherever the driver focuses, the driver will end up.

Isn't that what Jesus has taught us this morning? "What goes into your mouth won't defile you; what come out of your mouth will." Isn't that what the psalmist is demonstrating today by choosing words of blessing and praise rather than complaint and despair?

How can we focus on hope and healing and happiness? By intentionally speaking words of hope and healing and happiness!

When our speech is negative, complaining, accusatory, fearful...that's where our focus is, and what we focus on we drift toward, like the wall that Patrick Steward drove into!

The answer is to change our speech and make it more often optimistic and positive. What we think about we bring about.

Where attention goes, energy flows.

When our focus is positive we will find ourselves moving in positive directions. Our speech directs our thinking and our thinking directs our feelings and our feelings direct how we interpret and experience life.

When what comes out of our mouths is negative, we've defiled or hurt our own cause. The good news is we can change what comes out of our mouths; we can speak words of life and as we focus on the good, good is what we will move toward.

The Pharisees may complain that we aren't doing it according to their tradition, but we aren't responsible for their thinking; we are responsible for our own. We may sometimes be in the wilderness, but so is manna.

If we focus on the good, we'll experience the good, and those who see our demonstrations can condemn us for it or join us in the living a life hope and happiness.

We each get to make our own choices. This is the good news. Amen.

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**I am filled with loving-kindness.
I am filled with hope and joy.
I am filled with peace.
And I declare that all is well in my life.
All is well.
All is well.
And so it is!**

"Watch your manner of speech if you wish to develop a peaceful state of mind. Start each day by affirming peaceful, contented and happy attitudes and your days will tend to be pleasant and successful." – Norman Vincent Peale