

## ***Nurturing Mercy***

A Morning Message for Worship on the First Sunday of Lent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
February 14, 2016  
Text: Matthew 14:15-21

Lent began this past Wednesday. Don't worry if you missed it. Lots of people did I think. For one thing, it's awfully early this year. I can't even remember the last time Lent began *before* Valentine's Day! For another, this year it was really easy to lose track of Ash Wednesday in all the hoopla connected with the New Hampshire primary with two back to back snow storms added into the mix too. But, whether you were paying attention or not, Lent did begin this past Wednesday and through it we are presented with a unique opportunity to accept an invitation to invest a little of ourselves and our time in getting to know God better. That's essentially what Lent is – a dedicated period of time in which Christians, followers of Jesus, are invited through the liturgical calendar to set aside time and energy in order to understand God and your relationship with God a little better. So, at its most basic, Lent is about you and about God and how you two are connecting with each other, or not.

Key to understand here is that this is an *invitation*. It's not an expectation or a command, at least not in our tradition. Rather, it is an invitation which you must decide to accept or reject. Furthermore, once you accept the invitation, you must

decide what that means to you, how you will act on the invitation and the possibilities it offers. The invitation Lent offers you is not like a party invitation where you just show up for an event and then “go with the flow.” No, an invitation to engage in the observance of Lent is the first step in a process which takes intention and effort to undertake. Lent, if it is going to mean anything to you and do anything for you, means you must do more than just show up. It also helps to remember that this invitation comes to you via the church but really is from Jesus.

This only makes sense, when you think about it, because Lent originates in the story which follows the accounts of Jesus’ baptism in all four Gospels. You know that one. It’s when Jesus goes out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights to prepare himself for the work God needed him to do. That’s why Lent is 40 days long. And you may recall from this story that part of his experience in the wilderness was to stare down temptation in the form of Satan offering him food, power and wealth if only he would renounce God and worship Satan instead. That’s why Lent for us is a time of personal reflection to consider who we are in relationship to God and what God needs us to do in the midst of our everyday lives in a world tempting us away from what God wants for us and expects from us. Lent can be a rich time of self-discovery offering a unique renewal for our bodies and souls if we are willing to invest in this Lenten invitation from Jesus. Once we

decide to give it a try the question then becomes what the Lenten experience might be.

You may choose to do something on your own, like fasting or prayer walking or taking on some extra discipline of prayer or bible reading. Any or all of those are wonderful things and I encourage you onward if you have already made a decision about what you would like to do. But, for those still in search of formal Lenten practice this year, I am suggesting doing something rather different. I am suggesting a focus on the “Works of Mercy.” These Works of Mercy are an ancient list of physical and spiritual actions one undertakes to create a personal experience of God’s grace through living a Christian life more intentionally.

The Works have their foundation in the Parable of the Nations in Matthew 25. There are 14 of them broken down into two categories: physical – or things you can do to alleviate suffering – and spiritual – or things you can do to deepen your own faith or someone else’s. The Works have ancient roots which are being reawakened this year through the declaration by Pope Francis of a Jubilee Year of Mercy in the Roman Catholic Church. But I didn’t know that until a few days ago! I discovered it while reading an article on-line about what Pope Francis was suggesting folks should give up for Lent this year. He actually caused quite a stir when he suggested people needed to go beyond what he described as the superficial observation of Lent by giving up

something, usually a favorite food. The Pope thinks people need to go deeper than just giving something up for a brief period of time. He reminds us that Lenten sacrifices of favorite foods or anything else must enrich others if they are to be anything more than self-centered acts. Thus, the Pope is suggesting that for the next year Roman Catholics give up something more than chocolate or meat on Fridays. The Pope is urging the world's 1.3 billion Roman Catholics to give up indifference for Lent this year. Giving up *indifference* for Lent! Amazing! The pope is suggesting this because he believes “indifference to our neighbor and to God ... represents a real temptation for us Christians. ... [It leads to our] being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own.” (<http://time.com/3714056/pope-francis-lent-2015-fasting/>) Giving up indifference to the suffering of others as a Lenten discipline. Giving up indifference to God and faith as a Lenten discipline. Wow... Now there's a challenge for you.

Giving up indifference is, I think, the lesson Jesus was trying to teach the disciples in the story of the feeding of the 5000 from the Gospel of Matthew we read this morning. We all know this story, one of only two miracle stories common to all four Gospels. It's the end of a long day during which Jesus has been preaching and teaching, standing on a hillside with a huge crowd gathered

below. It's getting late so the disciples come to him, urging him to send the people on their way so they have time to get some food since they are surely hungry. And what does Jesus say to them? "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." YOU give them something to eat. Now, can't you just imagine how the disciples reacted to this? "What? What do you mean, give them something to eat? We only have five loaves and two fish here between all of us. We can't feed these people!"

And then what does Jesus do? Does he agree with them? Does he say, "of course, you're right. Send them along. How hungry can they be anyway?" Nope. Jesus does the extraordinary. He takes the five loaves and two fish in his hands, looks to heaven, blesses it and then has the disciples start giving it to the people. And then what happened? All ate until they were filled still leaving 12 baskets full of leftovers! Wow! How did that happen? Biblical scholars have puzzled over that one for years. Some would say it's a flat out miracle. Others would say everyone only took a little bit, more like a sacramental meal. Others would say the crowd wasn't really all that big. And still others would say that the real miracle was that Jesus by his example of extraordinary faith inspired such generosity in the people that everyone shared the food and drinks they already had with them. In other words, the real miracle was the overcoming of individual selfishness to create plenty where there had only been lack.

But this morning I don't want us to focus on the sudden and miraculous appearance of enough food to feed 5000 people. What I want us to see in this parable is an example of four of the Works of Mercy. The first two Works are easy enough to spot here. They are the first two Works in the physical category – feeding the hungry and satisfying the thirsty. There is no question that hungry people are eating in this story, and in a miraculous fashion. And it only makes sense that if they were eating, they were most likely sharing drinks too. And those drinks had to come from somewhere. I think it's most likely the people were inspired by Jesus' teaching and actions to incredible generosity sharing what they already had with them, and experiencing God's grace in the process. Can't you just see it? An old woman watching Jesus, seeing him bless the food and realizing there will never be enough. But maybe this little bit of bread and cheese she brought along will help things stretch a little farther so she opens her bag and starts to pass it out. That's when a young man sitting in the crowd watching her realizes he doesn't have any food to share but he did bring plenty to drink. And he offers it to the person next to him. And so on, and so on.

So, these two physical acts of mercy – feeding the hungry and satisfying the thirsty – are easy to see in this story. But what about the first two on the spiritual side? Those would be converting the sinner and instructing the less informed (ignorant,

actually). Well, setting aside the awkward “converting the sinner” language aside, what this is really about is getting someone to see the error of their ways so they can fix it. Getting someone to see the wrong they are doing so they will stop doing it. So who is doing something Jesus thinks is wrong in this story? Not the crowd, although one could argue they are seeing and responding to the sin of selfishness perhaps for the first time. True, but I think Jesus was really trying to get the disciples to see that they were sinning by ignoring a problem right in front of them because they thought they couldn’t fix it or that it would be too difficult to fix. Send them away to find their own food, they told Jesus. And he did just the opposite. And as he did he was teaching them, instructing the less informed, one might say, that they could not side-step or ignore problems right in front of them. They had to dig deep to find the faith inside of themselves to deal with the problem head on. And just to bring home the point, he had the disciples gather up all the leftovers! That was an in your face lesson to them for sure, but one I am sure they didn’t forget. And neither did anyone else who was there that day.

Nurturing mercy is what Jesus did that day with his disciples and with everyone gathered on that hillside to hear him teach and preach and pray. Nurturing mercy is what Jesus is inviting us to do every day, taking the time to pay attention to those in need all around us each day. Whether it’s a loved one in need of a little

extra time or a stranger in need of a kind word or smile or maybe even something more, you have the opportunity to nurture mercy in yourself and in other people every day. IF you take the time and make the effort to do it. Nurturing mercy in each of you is what I'm trying to do with the Lenten Experience guide on the Works of Mercy for Lent this year. Copies of the Lenten Experience are available in both narthexes and should be up on our website shortly for you to download and print. The guide contains suggestions for experiencing each of the Works of Mercy in your own way, on your own time. My sermons this Lent will also be an exploration of the Works of Mercy and I will make a point of being in Fellowship to answer your questions or receive your comments about them each Sunday.

So, dear friends, as we begin this journey through Lent together, I hope you will open your minds and your hearts to the many possibilities an encounter with mercy offers you. Nurturing mercy in yourself and others just might be the first step in renewing your own life and faith, in revitalizing our church, maybe even in changing the world. You just never know, but God does, always. One thing is clear – mercy is one commodity the whole world cries for every day. How will we answer? Amen.