

“From Nothing to Full” by Ray and Andy Thomas

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

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The Holy Way Presbyterian Church

Ray: Jesus sought to withdraw, by himself, after learning that John the Baptist had been killed by Herod. He went out, alone, on a boat. We've all known those times when we've needed to step away, give time and attention to our own care, or create space to allow recent happenings to soak in or be sorted out. We can imagine that is what Jesus sought. The crowd followed; wouldn't let him get away. We may have experienced that, too. Not crowds necessarily, but others, more than we'd like to find us. Persons with needs; hurting persons. All types of cries for help, coming to you. When he saw them, Matthew writes, "He had compassion for them and healed those who were sick." Have you been there?

Andy: The past 11 months I've been working as a Donation and Volunteer Coordinator/manager/on call chaplain at 12 Baskets Cafe in Asheville, NC. 12 Baskets is a nonprofit, volunteer run Cafe that serves rescued food. As I like to say, food is what we have but it's not who we are. It gets people in the door but our goal is to build relationships and community because we believe that once we know our neighbors, we will be more likely to share our resources with each other and, maybe even end homelessness.

One of these particular relationships is with a guest who turned into a close friend. My friend lived in one of the most dangerous low income neighborhoods in town, he lived with his sister, her dogs and her kids in a small apartment. He often had a broken leg or arm and didn't have a phone which made it hard for him to get a job even though he had plenty of work experience. My friend also had an intense drinking problem which eventually got so bad that he was drinking diluted hand sanitizer in the Cafe and passed out 3 days in a row. Three days in a row we had to call the ambulance because a member of our community was unresponsive. It was heartbreaking watching him slowly kill himself day after day after day. On the fourth day we caught him before he was too intoxicated and managed to get him into a detox unit and from there a temporary rehab center. In that time, things were really looking up and we were feeling hopeful about his future. Until he got out of the rehab unit and he had nowhere else to go except back to the neighborhood where he developed the addiction in the first place. Slowly but surely, we've been watching our friend slide back into his old habits and it's been frustrating watching this happen all over again and realize how little control we have over the situation. All we can do is walk alongside him and offer to help him get sober. I've also realized that we can't be mad at him for his addiction;; but I can be mad at the system that we have created that doesn't allow this illness to be properly treated.

I have a new hypothesis about that place, where Jesus sought to withdraw, while sick persons and their families and friends kept coming. Jesus saw them, had compassion on them, gave them his time and attention and love. My old reaction was how draining that must have been for Jesus, or for any of us. My new theory is based on what I hear

again and again from our Stephen Ministers: "I always get back more than I give." Love creates a mutual flow, bringing healing and fullness to both, within the one-to-one connection. As we move toward one another, so close to be able to hear, to touch, to know, to feel, we are personally changed by such bonds. There is a mysterious element added; **more** happens. Not less. We have a name for that mysterious, added influence: it's Jesus. Fills the void, lightens the burden, lifts the darkness, heals the broken. How does that theory hold, or not hold, in your YAV experiences?

How 12 Baskets interprets this story,

the liturgy of abundance vs myth of scarcity,- there is enough! Our society tells us that there's not so we hold onto more than we need because we are afraid that there isn't enough. Meanwhile the people who don't have anything keep getting less and less and less

That being said there's no such thing as haves and have-nots. We all have some things and we're all lacking somethings. We need to share and learn from each other and from people who are different than us because they might have something that we need.

Evening came, the disciples knew the crowd would be hungry and that their own food supply was insufficient, so the disciples asked Jesus to send them away, disengage, split off. "There's no need to send them away (disengage, separate). You give them something to eat." What do they have? Only scarcity. Only so much, or so very little, which will be easily depleted by the crush of so much urgent human need. "We have nothing here except five loaves and two fish." We have nothing here except virtual crumbs. We have nothing here but an obvious lack. We can't fix it. We can't make it turn around. We don't have enough. Been there?

Another thing we say at the Cafe is that sometimes we're called to serve and sometimes we're called to be served. The first morning we opened 12 Baskets, I had been working for the organization for only a month, my boss and I had everything going and set up, food was in the oven steam tables were on, dishwasher area set up the tables were made but then we got to the coffee. Neither of us knew how to make it in the industrialized coffee maker we had. Then came a deep voice from behind us saying, I can make the coffee. The voice came from a huge tattooed, ex-military guy whose name is Thorne and he taught us how to make the coffee. He went onto to be one of our closest friends in the Cafe and he is no longer homeless, he moved to Ohio and recently opened up a tattoo shop. This is a guy who I would have been afraid to see on the streets, downtown at night because of 12 Baskets, I know his story, I care about his well being and I'm happy to call him a friend. There is real community happening in a space where we want to get know and love our neighbor. Where we want to simultaneously serve, and be served.

My hypothesis #2 is that we reveal our blindness when we only look at what we have in our hands, or what we've got in our pockets. We picture Jesus with nothing in his hands when he was moved with compassion and healed them. We may have nothing except a

little time for this person, no magic words to say, no idea on how to fix multiple, pressing needs. Jesus simply says, "Bring them to me." Look, here, at what we have: each other. Many hungry people and Jesus. "Bring them to me." One of your favorite current writers, Richard Rohr writes, "Fortunately, life will lead us to the edge of our own resources. We must be led to an experience or situation that *we cannot fix or control or understand*. That's where faith begins." (Path of Descent, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, August 3, 2017, Center for Action and Contemplation) Been there?

We have a guest named Tina. One morning she came into the Cafe and I greeted her with the usual, morning, how ya doing? And she said I really struggled to get out of my tent this morning, today is one of the hardest days of the year for me. Today is my son's birthday and he would be 10 years old. But three years ago on this same day, he died. What got me out of the tent this morning was knowing I could go to a place where I knew I would be loved just as I am.

He ordered them to sit down. Sientete! To be still. Wait. Look around. Pay attention. Be in the moment, fully present with one another. He took the bread and fish, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave it to the disciples; gave them the almost nothing. The disciples gave that blessed and broken almost nothing to the crowd. Way too many people in the crowd to hear Jesus clearly without amplification, but they heard him, clearly. All emptiness became full: five thousand men plus women and children. With twelve baskets of leftovers. More left to give to others. More left to enjoy. More left to live. What do you find in your basket of leftovers?

Now, I could talk about here what I've gotten out of this experience but that seems too easy. In the Cafe, there is a sign that says, "Welcome: All Religions, All Sexes, All Sizes, All Ages, All Cultures, All Abilities, All Cultures, All Individuals, All Colors, All Orientations, Love Lives Here." So over the Summer time, the older group of kids from a Vacation Bible School came by and helped us open the Cafe and talked to some of our guests, it was a great experience. A couple days later, I saw on a friend's facebook who was the mother of one of these kids that her son had recreated our Welcome All sign and hung it on the door to his room. Since then he and his Mom have come into volunteer at 12 Baskets once a week. One day I just gave him a 12 Baskets shirt, usually we ask folks to make a donation to receive a shirt, but he was so good at what he did at the Cafe and he clearly wanted to be there that I wanted to raise that up.

When I gave him the shirt he was very grateful and tried to give me money for it and I said no. I told him you represent it at home, you represent it when you're here, now go out into the world and represent 12 Baskets.

And that's my invitation to all of y'all this morning. You do it here, you probably do it at home, now go out into the world and live into that Jesus inspired radical hospitality. Flip over tables, tell the elites to get out of their trees, walk alongside the people our society casts aside, show your brokenness so people know who you really are. Seek Justice, Love with Kindness, Walk Humbly with your God.