

# “More Than Food” by Marjory Bankson

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost



**August 6, 2023**

Matthew 14: 13-21

Our text for today begins with an odd sentence: “When Jesus heard this, he withdrew...”

Jesus has just been told that his beloved cousin, John, has been beheaded as a favor to Herod’s wife. Stunned, Jesus gets into a boat, needing a deserted place where he can be alone. Imagine what that news would mean to you. How you might feel – and how welcome a needy crowd would be. Or picture yourself as a member of the crowd, following a beloved teacher on foot – in the wake of his grief and your fears about what this means for the reform movement which was beginning to form

around them.

This is NOT the mood we want to set for celebrating Emmy Lu's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and yet I want to honor the discipline of dealing with the gospel text assigned for today. And death, whatever form it takes, will come to all of us. It's certainly waiting in the wings as we celebrate Emmy Lu's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Last week, we heard Oswaldo talk about another perspective, preparing a "death lodge" as part of his vision quest. We know there is something important to be learned from imagining our own death and from experiencing the death of others, especially those who are close to us.

From death, we can learn to value the gift and mystery of life itself. That, I think, is something that Emmy Lu embodies. She knows that each day is a precious gift!

**Now, back to the text.** In spite of his grief, or maybe because of it, Jesus is still capable of feeling compassion and he responds to the needs of the crowd. Mark says they "were like sheep without a shepherd." They needed help and Jesus was able to respond. I think of this as the first and most basic level of faith: needing a sense of connection. We often see that as giving and receiving *pastoral care*.

As Americans, most of us strive to be independent and self-sufficient. Not to need pastoral care. And yet we all need teaching and healing and connection – at every stage of life. The curse of individualism is that, as we age, we may feel invisible and lonely just as the need for connection becomes more acute. Emmy Lu has been able to stay connected to a caring network through Seekers and Living Water mission group, through L'Arche (where Fritz lives) and her dream group, and

through her long friendships with Sheri Alms, Dixcy, Gail, and others.

**In the Gospel story, we enter the second stage of faith** as evening comes and the disciples begin to worry about the needy crowd. They were far from food and shelter, so they approach Jesus as their leader: "Send the crowds away so they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Suddenly the crowd has become they – other than "us." It's a natural response to feeling helpless – to look for somebody who will take charge, especially in a dark and lonely place. Somebody to exercise power over the crowd. Somebody to save them. It's the organizational model of church, with a CEO/pastor who is paid to provide a spiritual context, to make decisions. And in this case, to "send them away."

There are times when we all want a saviour who will "send them away" rather than invite "them" to participate. But Jesus sidesteps the disciples' attempt to make him the authority figure. "You give them something to eat," he says. And when they respond by saying "We've just got five loaves and two fish,"

Then Jesus does something that we can all do: He gives thanks for what they have, and then invites the disciples to share it with the crowd. In other words, **Jesus becomes a celebrant**, the link between what is visible (bread and fish) and what is invisible (some underlying unity). By giving thanks in public, he evokes a spirit of connection that is already there. He makes it a **relational experience**. And, as it turns out, there is more than enough. It's like the grain of mustard seed, or yeast in a loaf of bread, waiting to be unleashed.

In many ways, Gordon Cosby was a singular leader whom many people in Church of the Saviour relied on. But, like Jesus, he regularly sidestepped that role in favor of someone who emerged with skills and a call to whatever mission Gordon had been promoting. He expected most of us to become celebrants

where we live and work.

And today, many people find Seekers a frustrating place because there is not a single person in charge. We have no charismatic pastor to save us when we are tired and hungry, or a long way from home. We have no single person who will take responsibility for the life and health of this church. Instead, we have opted for the relational pattern that Jesus invited them to in this story, trusting that the gifts we need will emerge as they are needed.

Whatever miraculous event took place on that ancient hillside to feed more than 5,000 people, I suspect it would not have happened without a celebrant, without that public act of gratitude, reminding everyone that there is enough right here if we will share what we have and BEING CONNECTED is food for the soul.

**Here at Seekers**, the role of celebrant emerges in every group. It's not a position or a title. It's simply a person who steps into an hour of need and reminds us that we belong to God's ongoing creation story, where life and death keep us in a dynamic state of becoming – no matter how young or old we are.

**I want to close with a few words about Emmy Lu as a celebrant.** What most of you know is that Emmy Lu is an entertainer and has been from her earliest years. Her parents were in vaudeville. She went to drama school, and later flourished at the Potter's House in the Kerygma Drama Group. In these later years, we've known her as "The Golden Miss Em," a still-glamorous cabaret singer.

But what most of you don't know about Emmy Lu is that she is the regular celebrant for Living Water mission group. Each week, she draws from her storehouse of poems and spiritual writings to open our weekly gathering on zoom. That means she thinks about the upcoming scripture, finds a poem or reading that will set our personal sharing in a larger context so we

can remember that we are not alone with our singular stories. She lives in one room, with one bookcase, and she uses that to feed our imagination.

And when she doubts her usefulness to others, we remind her that she too is a vital part of Christ's body, here and now. The blessing flows both ways. *I believe that is the key to aging with grace: To have something to give AND a place where that can be received.*

The story that Matthew tells of feeding 5,000 people is also a story of collective spiritual development for the disciples AND the wider community – from needing pastoral care – to seeking a leader who will save us from the hard work of taking responsibility for our own gifts – to claiming our gifts and sharing what we have here and now. It's an invitation to LIVE FULLY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT.

And, as we celebrate Emmy Lu's century birthday, we give thanks for that good news! Thank God we are in this together!

May it be so,

Amen.