

Not Sure I'm Good Enough
July 31, 2011 Proper 14A
Matthew 14:13-21
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A few years ago I was involved in a coaching process. One of the goals of the process was to clarify my core purpose and values in life. To that end, my coach did his best to find out what made me tick: Why do I gravitate toward some things and avoid other things? What makes me hesitant? Why do I get anxious? You know it goes. They poke and push and prod until they get you to admit something about yourself that you're not sure you want to face up to. One of the discoveries for me was a little message I send to myself from time to time: *I'm not sure I'm good enough*. My coach helped me to see that if I play this tape too often, I end up holding back, or being cautious, or even afraid.

Ever have thoughts like that? It certainly can be a part of our culture. Advertising does a great job of making us feel inadequate. That's the point...to create in us a perceived need so that eventually our life is just not complete until we wash our clothes in Tide, or see the latest Harry Potter movie, or head off to Culvers for one of their butter burgers. On top of that, Hollywood bombards us with images of beautiful people. And because we constantly compare ourselves to them, we find ourselves coming up short. It's an age old problem. It goes back before advertising, before Hollywood, all the way back to our gospel for today, and even further than that.

I wonder if Jesus himself is having some of these thoughts of inadequacy. He's human, after all. He's just heard the horrible news of John the Baptist's untimely death. John had the guts to preach on a political hot potato—King Herod's illicit relationship with his brother's wife. Word got back to Herod and he was furious. He threw John in prison. And eventually, at a party where the drinking and dancing got way out of control, Herod lopped off John's head.

When Jesus gets wind of it—at the beginning of today's gospel reading—he immediately climbs into a boat and goes away to a lonely place. He's all by himself. What he's thinking. Is he grieving? Probably. John was his cousin. But I wonder also if—for a brief moment—Jesus is second-guessing his own part in God's plan. He might be asking: *What's going to happen to me? Who am I to stand up to the powers that be? I'm not sure I'm good enough.*

The crowds don't leave Jesus alone for long. Someone catches sight of him out in the boat. Pretty soon they're clamoring for his attention. This is where Jesus is probably different than you and I. Rather than saying, "Come on, can you give a guy a break," he goes to meet the people on the shore. He has compassion on them. He heals their sick and raises their spirits.

By now it's evening. The children are restless and hungry, tugging on their mothers' skirts. The disciples are getting concerned. They beg Jesus to send the people into town. They clearly don't have enough food to feed them all and they can't afford to buy it. But Jesus sees the problem differently. In fact, he sees it as an opportunity. He says to his disciples: "No, *you* give them something to eat." The disciples throw their hands up in the air: "What are we going to do? We've got nothing...five little loaves, a couple of fish. Lord, we can't possibly do what you're asking."

Did you hear that? It's another version of "I'm not sure I'm good enough." Only this time it comes from all twelve of them. This getting to be a familiar refrain. Maybe that shouldn't surprise us. It's the response of parents who worry about their kids, especially because of peer pressure. What's a parent to do? *I'm not sure I'm good enough.* It's the response of a woman with a demanding boss who's never said an encouraging word to her. But you can't up and quit because there aren't any good jobs. *I'm not sure I'm good enough.* It's the response of a man who, month after month, borrows from one credit card to pay another, and who can't ever get over the hump. *I'm not sure I'm good enough.*

Oh, we can relate the disciples' response all too well. "Send them away, Jesus. Let them find their own bread. We've got enough problems of our own." But Jesus won't hear of it. "*You* give them something to eat!" Why does he say that? It seems like Jesus is always asking too much of us.

And that's precisely where this story "gets" us. Jesus has this way of asking more of us than we can possibly give—as disciples, as parents, as kids, as employees, as churchgoers. And how are we supposed to respond? We've only got five little loaves and a couple of fish. *We're not sure we're good enough.*

But wait. Jesus is about to speak a word that will change everything. "Bring what you have to me," he says, "Bring it to me." The disciples do as they're told. And as they

do, Jesus blesses the food and breaks the loaves and hands them back to them. And he says, “Now, give them to the people.” Before the evening is over, everyone has had enough to eat and there’s some to spare.

That’s good news. It’s good news for parents who wonder if they have what it takes to raise their kids. The answer is, “No, you don’t.” But you do have a Friend who says, “Bring your fears and frustrations to me. I will make you adequate for the task at hand.” That’s good news for the employee who doesn’t feel appreciated by her boss and for the man who’s juggling his credit cards. “Bring it all to me,” says Jesus, “and wait to see what I can do.” When accompanied by Jesus, it’s as if anything is possible.

As the economic downturn in our country has dragged on, we have more and more people showing up at our church asking for assistance. They come young and old, black and white...all of them a little rough around the edges. “I could use some help with rent,” they say. “Or, if that’s not possible, how about some money for gas or groceries?” The fact of the matter is, the more gas cards or grocery cards we pass out, the more folks that seem to come our way. The demand is so great, in fact, that we find ourselves running out of cards by the first week of the month.

What do we do? Pastor Jason recently sent out a letter to the other downtown churches. We’re inviting them to Zumbro so we can discuss it. We want to be able to coordinate our efforts and work together. We want to be able to use our money wisely. We want to be able to coordinate with existing social service agencies. The need is pressing. And Jesus’ words continue to ring in our ears, “*You* give them something to eat.”

In truth, there are plenty of times in life when we’re not good enough for the task at hand. We can’t feed everyone who shows up at our doors, or heal broken hearts, or change people’s minds, or raise perfect children, or make everything turn out right in the end. There’s only so much we can do. We’ve only got five little loaves and a couple of fish.

That’s when Jesus reminds us: “Bring them to me—your hopes, your dreams. Bring them to me—your burdens, your shortfalls, your disappointments. Bring them all to me.” If we do that, we are trusting that the One who took a meager lunch and fed a multitude, *can* do it again—indeed, *will* do it again.

What do we do? Last Saturday afternoon a group of us put up a tent for the outdoor worship service on Sunday morning. As we were finishing our work, we were approached by a Latino man. He had a large backpack slung over his shoulder. “Is there a pastor here,” he asked in broken English. “Yes,” I said, “I’ll be with you in a minute.” I asked the others in the group to join me. He told us his name was Emiliano. He was trying to get to Albert Lea, so he could grab a bus to Des Moines, and then a flight tomorrow morning to Monterrey, Mexico. He said he had some time off. He wanted to visit family in Mexico before coming back this fall to dig potatoes in the Red River Valley. He had the money for a bus ticket to Albert Lea, but the station was closed. How could he get there? I had another commitment, which quite frankly I was relieved about, so I halfheartedly suggested hitchhiking. There was an awkward pause. Then Dave Erickson from our group spoke up, “I can give you a ride.” The man was visibly relieved. And before you know it, these two were off to Albert Lea to find the bus station.

Friends, when we’re feeling overwhelmed by the crush of human need, by the sheer burden of everything that needs to get done, perhaps it’s because we’ve been focusing too much on what *we* can do and too little on what *Jesus* can do through us. When we’re not sure if we’re good enough, we need to remember that Someone is close at hand who can do what we cannot. That Someone is Jesus, who found a way to face up to his fears and go to the cross. Rest assured: Jesus can help feed hungry people, and heal hurts, and right wrongs, and open doors, and change minds, and love even the lovable. Jesus can take what little we have, and make it more than enough. “Bring it to me,” he says, “bring it all to me, and wait to see what I can do through you.” AMEN.