

Sermon - For the Love of Children  
October 17, 2021  
The United Churches of Olympia

We have two vastly different stories for us today. The first is a gospel reading (John 6: 1-14) of the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes. It is lively and upbeat. You can almost feel the chaos and excitement in the air as people are drawn to Jesus. And how Jesus intentionally moves to meet their physical, spiritual and communal needs.

In the other we have inconsolable weeping and grief of Rachel (Jeremiah 31:15-17) lamenting the loss of her children. Both of these stories can inspire us and challenge us as we consider the health and wellbeing of our children on this Children's Sabbath Sunday.

Let's start with Rachel. Who is this grieving mother whose grief still moves us and connects us to her even today?

Rachel is a matriarch in the book of Genesis. She is a shepherdess and as she approaches the well to provide water to her sheep she is met by Jacob, brother of Esau. Jacob had to leave home after stealing the birthright from his brother. His father told him to go and find his uncle, Laban and marry one of his daughters. Happy his plan is working, Jacob returns home with Rachel. Jacob wants to marry Rachel. His father-in-law says he must work seven years for him and then he can marry Rachel.

Now Rachel has an older sister named Leah and tradition would say that Leah must marry first so on the wedding day the sisters are swapped, and Jacob marries Leah. Rachel is stuck in this patriarchal system where she is the property of her father until she becomes the property of her husband. Jacob has to work seven more years before he can marry Rachel. During this time, Leah begins to bear many children, lots of children. And her slaves are having babies. Everyone is having children except Rachel. She is cast in that role as barren like so many women in our holy scripture. And like many other of our foremothers, Rachel is finally able to conceive and gives birth to a son named Joseph. The apparent recipient of a curse cast by her husband, Rachel will later die while giving birth to her second son Benjamin. Genesis continues with the adventures of Jacob in Joseph and his coat of many colors and being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers.

The words in Jeremiah therefore cannot be literal. Rachel did not mourn the loss of her own children because she died before she could even see them grow and flourish.

These verses in Jeremiah come in chapter which starts by relaying hope for the children of Israel. They are returning from being conquered and scattered. Their culture had been squashed and their community had been decimated. Jeremiah brings a prophecy of release

and restoration. They are reminded of the provision and salvation that Jacob found. They are promised that once again God will gather her children together. And as very large part of this prophecy is the elevation of those with disabilities, pregnant and laboring mothers. You can almost imagine the least of these among the community marching on the front line, leading the way home. They are given the promise of vibrancy, and their mourning turning to gladness, their sorrows to joy.

This reference to Rachel in Jeremiah is symbolic. Rachel represents a matriarchal figure of the children of Israel who is crying out at the trauma and loss of her children due to colonization, exile and violence. These same scriptures are repeated in Matthew 2 in the birth narrative of Jesus when the magi return home another way refusing to tell Herod where the Christ child is born and Herod in his anger (and in parallel to the murder of the first born sons in the Moses story) orders the killing all male children under the age of two and so again we are told at the weeping of Rachel can be heard throughout the land.

Jesus was the target of this hate campaign. And he grew up in the shadow of the murder of innocence. I don't think we spend much time considering the trauma that surrounded Jesus's earliest years. Members of targeted groups hold this trauma in their bodies. It makes me more curious about Jesus and how he was able to heal himself and others around him. There is no doubt Jesus held a special connection with children (and maybe this is why) and we see over and over again how Jesus valued children and took opportunity to elevate, heal and include them in his vision for the world.

Our reading in John recounts the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes (feeding the 5,000) a commonly known story in scripture. In fact, it is recorded in all four of the gospels and Matthew and Mark go on and include another slightly smaller feeding of the 4,000 in their writings. So, it stands to reason that this is an important event. One that holds lessons and insights worthy of being passed down from generation to generation. I especially like the John version.

Jesus tells the disciples to go and buy food to feed all of these people to which the disciples reply we don't have enough money to do that. Then, when a disciple brings the offering of one young persons meal, the others respond, this is but a drop in the bucket of what we really need. The disciples, like us, are looking at the enormous task ahead of them and our focusing on how they don't have enough. They have come to the situation with a scarcity mindset, preferring to just send everybody home to fend for themselves. The disciples in this story, like in so many of the stories in the gospel, just can't see the big picture. And in many ways, we are like them.

Jesus, however, operates out of a model of abundance having come to give us life and that life is abundant. So, Jesus says have them sit where there's plenty of grass, there's plenty of space, for all of us here, have them sit. And then, in much the same way that he will later do when he institutes our holy sacrament of communion, he takes the bread and the fish and having given thanks for them, he starts feeding people. And he doesn't stop until all have been fed. And out of the abundance of the generosity of this young person there were leftovers enough to feed more.

So, what is the miracle that really happened here? Is it that Jesus indeed took 5 loaves and two fish and fed thousands? That could be it. Could it also be that when everybody else saw this young person come forward, willing to share their food that they too reached into their baskets and started sharing what they had brought with others around them? This could be the biggest miracle of all. That when people out of their generosity, share with the strangers around them there is enough. In community, we can experience fullness and abundance.

What a great model for stewardship, that if we act in faith and we share our time, talents and resources there will be enough to meet our needs, to provide for others. And through generosity, we will inspire others and together, we will be multiplied and we will experience abundance.

I am reminded of the folk story "Stone Soup". In this story, travelers come into a village carrying an empty pot and they ask people in the village for food and the people deny them their request, so the travelers go down to the stream and fill the pot with water and set it over a fire to boil and they dropped one stone in the pot. In the town, people come up and ask what they're making, and they say they're making stone soup and they will gladly share some when it's ready. But then they say it could use a little more flavor and seasoning so could you please add one ingredient to the soup to make it better. So, one towns person adds a carrot and then others come, and they add potatoes, peas, cabbage, tomatoes, salt, and pepper until the pot is full. The traveler removes the stone from the pot and what is left is a beautiful meal that all the town shares together.

We have in the gospel reading the miracle of the generosity. The miracle of community, illustrating how together we can achieve what individually we cannot.

And today this story, the feeding of the multitudes, is also important because it highlights the role of young people in our community. Our children and our youth are multipliers of our joy, of our commitment to justice, to our belief in radical hospitality. You don't have to spend much time with children to understand the limitlessness of their creativity and desire to help others

For them it's quite simple. People should have housing. People should have health care. People should be safe. People should be fed. People should have jobs and schools and families. The earth should be cared for and people should be celebrated for the beautiful diversity they bring. It really is just that simple. Our children in this congregation are privileged and are generous. We love them, pray for them and we mourn their absence. Covid has separated us. We miss them being gathered on the quilt in the sanctuary, watching them squirm and giggle, run around the snack table and wave palm fronds. And we look forward to the day when we too will be restored and gathered back together in this space to sing and pray and worship Jesus together.

So today we recommit ourselves to our children and to all children because we know their voice is not heard in seats of power unless it comes through us. Because we know the faith of children is enough to change the world. And we know all too well the plight that too many children here in Washington, here in the United States, and globally that too many children live in poverty, too many children go without health care, children are separated at our borders from their parents, children are trafficked, children suffer abuse at the hands of the powerful.

Rachel still cries out through us and shall not be consoled until her children are brought home to her safe and healthy, playing, laughing.

May the actions that we take, in the words that we speak, and the community that we build, continue to uplift our children and youth in this place of prophets and teachers and healers for the generations to come and a healing balm amidst our pain and sorrow.