

January 22, 2023
Matthew 14:13-21



This morning, we continue the series of messages titled *Faith, Hope, and Love*. This week we continue with the theme of *hope*, with a message titled *The Power of Hope*.

All of us have hopes. Some are modest and some are much more grand. One of my hopes this year is to become a better golfer. That's a fairly tall order. I'm a terrible golfer, so my hope this year is to move up one level, and become a bad golfer. Fortunately, I am getting some help from some of our fellow congregants, like Jimmy Hatter and Jim Oates. I am looking forward to when I can tell everyone that Jimmy and Jim have made me a bad golfer.

I think we have some modest hopes because our larger hopes can seem very daunting. We have hopes for not only our lives, but the lives of our loved ones. We hope our children and grandchildren have good lives, and we worry about what hope there is for them in the future. We have large hopes for the world, and in our present context, it can be very difficult to maintain a sense of hope.

The Scripture text for this morning is one that is very familiar – the feeding of the 5,000. On the surface, this might seem like an unusual passage for a message on hope, especially since the word is never used, but I believe that hope is a very strong theme in this story.

Follow along with me as I read that passage, from the gospel Matthew. Matthew 14:13-21 –

13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.

14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

16 Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

17 “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

18 “Bring them here to me,” he said.

19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

As was so often the case when Jesus sought time alone, the crowds found him, and flocked to him, and this is where we find the strong presence of hope in this story. Did the people come after Jesus because they were hungry? No doubt many were, but they could not be certain they would be fed. Were they interested in seeing a miracle? Probably, as most of them had heard reports of miracles, and perhaps some had seen Jesus perform one. There were many reasons why the crowds followed Jesus, but I would argue there was one reason above all others that drew the people to Jesus – the crowds followed Jesus because of hope.

This was a crowd of people who were mostly without hope, and Jesus stirred hope within them. Life was, for most people, very difficult in the time of Jesus. The life expectancy for that time in history was about 35 years, with some scholars placing it even lower, around 30. The few years of life experienced by most people was not easy. Many people did not have enough to eat, they lived in harsh circumstances, and they were poor, and most of them were very poor. Combined with the difficult political reality of the brutal occupation of the Roman Empire, there wasn't much to provide people with a sense of hope.

And then Jesus appears on the scene. Jesus healed people; he told them they were of value, while the political and religious leaders communicated they were of little or no value; he fed them; he loved them; and gave a multitude of other reasons for people to have hope.

There is so much power in hope. So, allow me to share a few perspectives on *The Power of Hope*.

1. Nurture hope by nurturing your spiritual life.

As the passage begins, Jesus had withdrawn from the public eye in order to find some measure of solitude. This was not the first time Jesus sought to escape the crush of the crowds that followed after him. In Mark's gospel, for instance, in 1:35, we read that *very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed*. Jesus provides us with the example of the importance of making time for prayer, for rest, and for renewal.

To speak honestly, I am not the person best qualified to say anything about the importance of rest and renewal. I don't do rest very well. I am not good at relaxing. But as a result of my failure to look after myself and to get rest, I found myself in a hospital emergency room several years ago because of exhaustion, so maybe that does give me a bit of insight into the importance of self-care and the need to take the time to nurture our spiritual lives.

When I was in the emergency room that day, I was lying in a bed, thinking about all that I needed to be doing (which is not at all what I should have been thinking at that moment). I had my phone on the bed

beside me, and it rang. The call was from one of the funeral homes, asking me if I could officiate at a funeral. I told them to give me a little while to think about it and I would call them back. The doctor overheard enough of the conversation to know I was talking to a funeral home about officiating at a funeral and said to me, *unless you want someone to be planning your funeral, you need to slow down.* Point taken. Perhaps...

It is not easy to find a healthy balance between fulfilling our responsibilities and caring for our spiritual and physical health. We can be driven by guilt, believing we can't slow down or step off the treadmill of life. We can be driven by an obsession that tells us that our value as a person is found in what we produce or in what we accomplish. We are driven by many forces in life, and not all of them are healthy.

But notice that Jesus was never hesitant to step away and find a time of quiet in order to nurture his spirit. At different points in his ministry, Jesus sought solitude over action. He entered the wilderness after his baptism and spent 40 days there. While in the wilderness, Jesus faced temptations, and those temptations were spurned because of the power of his spirit, which he always nurtured, and that practice becomes a powerful example to us. Before the crucifixion, he entered the Garden of Gethsemane, taking his disciples with him, and then going further into the garden, on his own, to pray.

Spiritual and physical exhaustion are no friends to hope. When we become worn down – physically and spiritually – it is hard to be hopeful.

2. Jesus challenged his followers to become agents of hope.

I don't know if you ever imagine what it would be like to be present at some of these events in the gospel, but I do. I think this would have been an amazing event to experience. Of course, it would have been my luck that had I been there, it wouldn't have been fish the disciples brought to Jesus, but fish casseroles.

When the disciples urged Jesus to send the crowds away, believing they could not feed so many people, he surprised them with the

statement, *you give them something to eat* (verse 16). The disciples were more than a little overwhelmed when Jesus told them to provide food to the crowd. While I don't believe Jesus expected the disciples to feed that large crowd, he was reminding them of their call to be messengers of hope, and to bring hope by meeting the needs of the people in that crowd.

We are not just recipients of hope; we are messengers of hope.

The calling of the church through the ages has been to provide hope by making a difference in the lives of others, and the church has done that for two millennia. The church took the call of Jesus to *give them something to eat* very much to heart, and the church has been feeding people for 2,000 years. The first ministry of the church, in fact, was feeding people. The book of Acts, in chapter 6, tells of the calling of the first deacons, who were appointed to oversee the ministry of feeding people. Our congregation, in several different ways, continues this long tradition of feeding people. We help distribute food at the Serenity Center, we back backpacks for students, we feed the guys at the Men's Shelter, we helped at God's Kitchen when that was an ongoing ministry, we feed people at a time of loss, we have distributed food gift cards, and food baskets, and more.

And it's not just feeding people where the church has been involved. Every major social movement to improve the lives of people has some connection to faith, and most are direct outcomes of the ministry of the church over the centuries. The church has been the leader not only in feeding people, but in providing the example of working to improve the lives of people. Whether through education, medical care, equality, or any other methods of bringing hope to people, the church has been there. Before the church was founded, social safety nets did not exist in any meaningful way, and now many governments, under the direct influence of the church, have established social safety nets that provide care for many, many people.

Now, I will also admit, that has not always been a straight road. While the church was the soil out of which grew opposition to evils such as slavery, for instance, we cannot overlook the reality that some within

the church have been part of perpetuating such an evil and have been guilty of other terrible actions. That, unfortunately, is part of our challenge, as there are always those who will use the church and twist its message into something that takes away hope rather than being a force to dispense hope. Jesus took on that challenge, as he opposed the religious and political leaders of his day who sought to impose difficulties on others. The words and the actions of Jesus set the example for his followers to be agents of hope.

3. The power of hope is...well, powerful. Incredibly powerful. And incredibly needed.

A question I think well worth asking is this – *how is it, in a country as wealthy as ours, a country with so much opportunity and so many other blessings, that we see so much despair and hopelessness?* I know there are many needs in our country; I am not unaware of that certainly. But we are a nation that has so much, so how is it, when we have so much and when there is so much opportunity, that so many people are unsatisfied, and why is it that so many people are without hope?

I think it is accurate to say that hope is not the ever-present commodity that it once was. I believe we see that to be true as we look at younger generations, who are not growing up and coming of age with the sense of optimism and hope that was a hallmark of previous generations. My parents – the WWII generation – grew up with a strong sense of hope, even though most of them grew up with very little. My generation – the Baby Boomers – grew up with a strong sense of optimism and hope. We were going to change the world, all while putting flowers in our hair and wearing bad fashion. With each successive generation, however, there seems to be less and less hope. To be fair, there are those who would say, *Dave, you don't know what you are talking about. There is still a good deal of hope out there.* Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not saying there is no hope, but I am saying that I believe it is an increasingly precious commodity in our culture and worldwide as well, and that hope seems to be declining more than rising. Maybe it's because the wealth gap has been growing into such an

impassible chasm. Maybe it's because opportunity is increasingly out of reach for so many people. Maybe it's because many people do not feel as though they have many blessings in life. There are any number of reasons, but hope is not what it once was, even though hope remains so incredibly important, and so very much needed.

When I was beginning in ministry, I looked at things differently than I do now. I have been in ministry over 40 years, and my definition of success has certainly changed. When I was young, I had a very different set of metrics for measuring what I considered to be success. Now, at 65 years old, one of my primary measurements of success is the hope of remaining faithful – faithful to God, faithful to the church I serve, and faithful to my family. I hope to have some impact on the lives of others and to be a hopeful person. I want to be a dispenser of hope, and it is this ambition that guides everything I do. It guides how I preach, how I teach, and how I deal with people. I now recognize that one of the greatest gifts I can bring to people is a sense of hope, so I work to be hopeful, optimistic, and encouraging in what I say and in what I do, so when I point out that many people do not have hope, it is a reminder of how important it is that we become people of hope, and people who share hope. Hope remains one of our clarion calls as God's people, and there is so much power in hope.

The crowds flocked to Jesus because in him, they found hope. People can still find hope in Jesus. We hope for a good life. We hope for a good job that will pay our bills and take care of our family. But we must remember that our hearts and our souls desire what cannot be fully satisfied by just material possessions. We live in a world where people are anesthetizing themselves for various reasons, but the primary reason, I believe, is a lack of hope. That anesthetizing takes place with substances, of course, but it's also screens and entertainment and any number of other distractions that take attention away from the lack of satisfaction with life. That's why I like what Matthew says in verse 20 – *They all ate and were satisfied*. I wish that were a phrase that could define our society, but I fear it does not. We need bread, but we need

the Bread of Life as well. What will it take for satisfaction to come?
Hope. That is the answer.