

Nothing But Failure
Matthew 14:13-33
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February 24, 2019
Northminster Presbyterian Church

Just a few years ago it was a place that just reeked of failure. The Arlington Presbyterian Church was a depressing place for many on Sunday mornings. Their 80+ year old sanctuary, built in grand Southern style, could hold 500, but typically welcomed fewer than 65 on a Sunday, and most of them were over 65. It was still an active church with a coat closet ministry that had been providing interview clothing for those in need for decades. There was a generous spirit...but also fatigue and, for many, a sense of defeat. What had once been a thriving place was now seen by many as one step from the closed church grave. Failure and the prospect of the church being nothing was too much for many to handle.

Four years ago this month, National Capital Presbytery approved the vote to demolish the church. It was a place where failure and the threat of nothingness seemed to be encroaching. Nothing...and Failure...nothing but failure...

These are two themes that echo so strongly in today's passage...another chance for the Narrative lectionary to mess with us by combining two of the most famous passages in Matthew's gospel...the feeding of the 5000 and Matthew's particular vision of Jesus walking on water and Peter giving it a try...

First, let's catch up to where Jesus is in his public ministry. Just a few chapters ago, the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus. It was on the heels of that rejection that he travels from Galilee...to Judea...closer to Jerusalem...to the centers of power and influence in occupied Israel. It was on the way that he was teaching last week. And it is at this point in the story we get a bit of a flashback...just before today's text, the end of John the Baptist's story is told...the royal banquet, the call for John's death by the king's step-daughter and his subsequent murder... It is in an attempt to retreat from this news to consider what to do that we meet back up with him in today's passage...But the people won't let him retreat...they follow him...and the disciples. The disciples screw up again and forget to alert the Fellowship committee and so here they are...out in the sticks...and they haven't even brought enough food for themselves...let alone the crowds. They have virtually nothing...what will they do?

Lutheran pastor and now famous author and seminar leader Nadia Bolz Weber understands how they felt...in an article on this passage that eventually became part of one of her books she ponders...

"'What do we have?' they asked. 'We have nothing. Nothing but a few loaves and a couple of fish.' and they said this as though it were a bad thing. The disciples...forgot that they have a God who created the universe out of 'nothing,' that can put flesh on dry bones 'nothing,' that can put life in a dusty womb 'nothing.' I mean, let's face it, 'nothing' is God's favorite material to work with. Perhaps God looks upon that which we dismiss as nothing, insignificant, and worthless and says, 'Ha! Now that I can do something with.'"¹

¹ Bolz-Weber, p. 105.

Bolz-Weber shared that reflection in the context of telling the story of the worst Banner Sunday/Rally Day EVER. She had worked her fingers to the bone, even renting a cotton candy machine, helped pull together all the needed stuff for a huge burger cookout in front of the church...all to attract new folks to join the journey of House of All Saints and Sinners, the church she founded and served for over a decade until late last year....and 26 people showed up...and nobody put one red cent in the donations basket. So no new people came and those that did were cheap...it was a whole lot of nothing....

Until she remembered the joy the people who came had serving food to folks on the street...and remembered the prayers she had received for her aching back....and remembered that nothing is God's favorite building block. When she shared the story at a Lutheran conference that same week that it happened, community was built over lunch on shared stories of failure. And that was enough...that was a time for God to build something out of nothing.

God makes something of nothing on that Judean hillside and the people are fed...how? We don't know. Like all the synoptic gospel versions of this story, nobody seems to notice a miracle is happening. All the people seem to remember is being fed. They just see that all eat...and that there is food left over...something from nothing indeed...

Back to that city block in Arlington....On that same spot, within just a few weeks, the first tenants will be able to pick out their apartments for move-in this summer. At 173 units, with

almost half with 2 or 3 bedrooms, it's the largest new affordable housing project in recent memory in that community.

The development is called Gilliam Place. It's named for Rhonda Gilliam. He's the member of Arlington Presbyterian who founded that clothing ministry decades ago. He was also one of their first African-American elders.

You see, six years ago in the midst of all that talk of nothing and failure, the women and men of Arlington Pres. began a period of discernment. They were trying to discern their call for the coming years...and so they asked themselves...not what will happen to us....but what is breaking our hearts? Where is the greatest need in our community?

Arlington, VA is not just the place where the large Federal cemetery is located...it's also part of a new tech corridor...a miniature silicon valley...and so it's become insanely expensive to live there. So expensive in fact that working people have no place to live...teachers, police officers, starting doctors interning at the local hospitals...not to mention the working poor. There is no place for them to live in Arlington...and so the people of Arlington Pres heard this need and it broke their hearts...why should these people so important to their community have to live miles away and suffer through hours of commute each day?

And they reached out...they reached out to affordable housing charities...and to the city of Arlington...and to the denomination...and to a developer...and after 2 years...they had a plan...a 5 story building taking up most of their block...filled with affordable housing units...parking...storefronts for the services

those residents will need...God was indeed making something of nothing...

And then, they suffered a failure....Their original plan did not include anything about their continued existence as a congregation...so the Presbytery rejected their original proposal...and it was a frightening time for them and everything was about to fall apart...

Peter would totally understand...Our second passage today is the most detailed and original of the three gospel versions of this event...Jesus walking on water, calming the storm...and this particular unique element to Matthew's telling of the story... Peter stepping out of the boat...

This occurs ONLY in Matthew. Peter stays dry in the other gospels. The popular interpretation of the passage is that Peter steps out of the boat...makes it a few steps and then gets distracted...by the storm...by the fact that he is walking on water...who knows. BUT, the verb form used is odd, the "inceptive aorist." It can be a statement of intent or the starting moments of a continuous action. It could mean "we was fixin' to and he started to", or it could mean "he started and was actually walking toward Jesus" a few steps before doubt and fear intervened.

Regardless...he's stepping out...and he fails...he has the passion and the intent...but he hasn't stopped to think it all through—or maybe he overthinks it...and so the moment when he has to confront reality...he fails...

Sort of like our friends in Arlington...they hadn't thought it all through...until the Presbytery reminded them...the new life they were hoping for their neighborhood needed to include them, too.

And so they went back to work...and figured it out...those storefronts for essential services in the neighborhood...what if they configured it so that one of those storefronts was their church...a presence right in the midst of the new community they are helping to create...

With that addition, their plan was overwhelmingly approved and the demolition started 5 years ago this summer.

It is being called one of the boldest moves by a church in the last 20 years...to create from their largely empty, but beautiful sanctuary something completely new...taking the risks to see what wondrous thing God can make when they scale back to nothing...God's favorite thing to work with...

So what does this mean for us? Well, I'm not suggesting we tear down this edifice and build affordable housing on our six lots...for lots of different reasons. But with our 100th anniversary looming just 4 years from now...its a good time for us to imagine who God is calling this community to be in and for the future...

On the Southside of Chicago 10 years ago, the Reverend Linda Wygant was searching for where God was calling her to serve. She had just qualified as a master gardener and had been on the staff at McCormick seminary, but was feeling called away from that work to use her new-found skills.

And so she founded Grace Seeds Ministry...a non-profit that would seek out new ministry opportunities on the South side...linking justice and the sacraments...

And she got an idea. Starting with no budget, and no real experience beyond her training, she went to three little churches...one Presbyterian and two Lutheran...places where there were already church gardens....and she asked where the food was going...and learned there wasn't a clear system in place....so she invited those three churches to create Share the Harvest...a program to raise vegetables and get them to food pantries that couldn't afford to participate in the produce mobile or other ways of getting fresh food to pantry guests.

That first year, eventually there were just over a half dozen mostly Presbyterian, Lutheran and Catholic churches raising tomatoes and zucchini and the like for the poor of the south side.

Last year Share the Harvest had 44 institutional growing partners, including churches, schools, the county jail, and a couple of urban farms...and hundreds of home growers....They provided over 18,000 pounds of fresh produce grown by every day people in gardens from 4 foot square to a 1/4 acre...for free. They provided recipes and cooking demonstrations...and in West Garfield Park—one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in Chicago—they started a pilot program in the middle of one of Chicago's most notorious food deserts...building gardens in front yards and back yards of homes and apartments, in garden bags and planters on front stoops...teaching and empowering people to raise produce for themselves and others. That new program is called "gardens without borders." The hope is that it can spread across the central corridor of Chicago where food deserts are most common.

From nothing but an idea and a sense of calling...and three churches willing to be the first to say yes...God, Linda and hundreds of volunteers have made a ministry that feeds people—

body, mind and soul—as they share the harvest with themselves and others.

What's the message for us in this passage and the examples of our sister congregation in Virginia and those engaged in Share the Harvest....

Maybe as we prepare for our second century it's to not be afraid to start something new from nothing and to not be afraid to fail a few times before we find the path that will work best for who God and this community need us to be...Maybe it's a reminder that we should be looking for opportunities to partner with people and organizations already beginning God's new thing...

The ministry built in Jesus' move from Galilee to Judea formed the foundation of the church...from nothing came the movement that would change the world. If God can make that from nothing...just imagine what the Lord can do with you...with me....with this blessed place called Northminster.