

God Guides our Story

COMMUNION

August 2, 2020

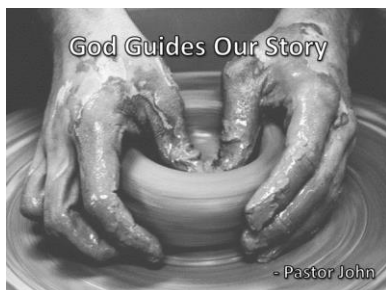
Romans 9: 1-5

¹ I am speaking the truth in Christ — I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit — ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Matthew 14: 13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were

filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.



As we gather on this communion Sunday, we delve into two scripture passages that reveal different ways that God guides our story. In Romans 9, Paul used to be where most of the Israelites are: disliking Jesus, wanting to remain with the Jewish faith, not willing to make room for the new revelation found in Jesus Christ. But now he so wants his people to come to know Jesus. He is even willing to be cursed and to be cut off from Jesus himself just for them to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. In Matthew 14 we see Jesus teaching the disciples to trust God – to offer what they have and to see how God will multiply it. That was the story of the seed planted in good soil from the beginning of Matthew 13 – the yield was a crop thirty or sixty or a hundred-fold.

In “Toy Story 2” we see Woody’s struggle to find one’s identity and one’s place in the world. The wrestling with one’s existence is rooted in the fear of being outgrown, passed by, forgotten. Woody struggles with newfound “fame” and is drawn away from his true friends – from Andy’s other toys. In our lives we fight this too. Our faith can be tested when we see our friends and neighbors advancing at work, in life, in our social circles. On the keep-up treadmill we so easily loose our focus on what matters – our faith. We will see today how we find our true worth only when we trust God enough to allow God to guide our story.

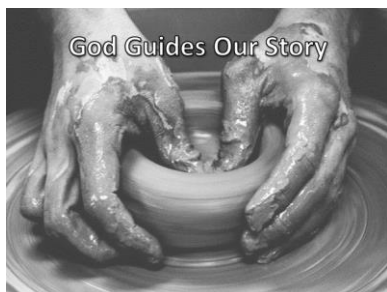
It was when the disciples did just this - when they trusted God and allowed God to guide the story - that they witnessed the power of God in a first-person way that began to truly transform their lives and their faith and how they saw themselves in the ministry of Jesus. We too can experience this same thing when we allow God to guide our stories. Let us pray...

As we begin this morning, I invite you to turn to Romans 9 in your Bibles. Chapter 9 is the start of a section that runs through chapter 11 that takes up the problem raised by the unbelief of so many Jews. In today's passage, verses one through five, Paul wrestles with this question: if God promised salvation to the Jews, why are so few being saved through faith in Jesus Christ? The essence of this question is what drives Paul's emotions that we can so clearly hear in today's opening passage. **That emotion is on full display as we**

read verse two: *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart"*. Paul is willing to be cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of the Jews being saved.



In his heart, Paul knows that nothing can separate him from the love of God found in Christ Jesus. That was part of last week's message, right? But here he is lamenting the fact that so few Jews are being saved. In his offer to be cursed, he is echoing Moses' plea to God to kill him in order to spare the disobedient children of God after they had made the golden calf during the exodus. Paul sees that the Israelites cannot focus on the truths of Jesus and he longs for them to see clearly who Jesus is. Paul knows that this would draw them into that saving relationship that he so desires for his kinfolk.



In "Toy Story 2" Woody's struggle is with relationship and identity. After finding new friends and fame, he tells Buzz, *"I can't go. They need me"*. In response Buzz reminds him, *"You are not a collector item. You are a toy"*! Woody's own words from the first days of their

friendship are echoed back to him from Buzz. But Woody is caught up in the things of the world – popularity, power, prestige. We get there too. And despite Buzz's parting shot that *"life is only worth living if you are loved by a boy"*, Woody tells Buzz and Rex and Slinky and Mr. Potato Head and the Pig, *"you have wasted your time"*. Woody thinks going to the museum in Tokyo is his only chance to really matter in this world. As Buzz and the gang sadly walk away, Buzz comments, *"Some life"*. As Woody sits down to consider his decision, on television a marionette Woody sings a song on "Woody's Roundup". The words to the song keep repeating: *"you got a friend in me... you got a friend in me... you got a friend in me..."*. These words draw Woody back to the relationship that matters. As Woody considers his situation, he comes to realize that being loved by Andy is what really matters in his life. It is all that matters. Acknowledging the truth of Stinky Pete's words, Woody admits that he can't keep Andy from growing up but adds that he still wouldn't miss it for the world. Realizing the joy and happiness that he finds in being a part of Andy's life, Woody even invites Jesse and Bullseye and Stinky Pete to come and be loved. This parallels what Paul is saying to the Israelites. He begs them to come and know the joy and happiness found in a life lived with Christ. Notice this new term. Previously in Romans Paul used the word *"Jews"*. In calling the Jews the *"people of Israel"* Paul is emphasizing the covenant relationship that opened them up to their initial adoption as God's chosen people.

The adoption is what matters. With adoption it meant that they could receive God's promises and blessings. And because Christ himself came from the Israelites, from the line of David, the first offer of salvation through faith in Christ was made to the Israelites. In spite of having all of this working in favor of choosing to have faith in Jesus, many Jews were failing to do so. Part of Paul's anguish also comes from where he once was as a Pharisee and persecutor of the earliest Christians, back when he was known as Saul. Remember, Paul was a Pharisee among Pharisees – so proud of how well he knew and of how well he kept the law, the covenants, and so forth. And then he met Jesus. From that new vantage point Paul saw how far short the law fell of a true relationship with God. As we hear his sorrow for Israel, we know that they have what he had - but they do not know Jesus. He would give anything for the people of Israel to know Jesus. Paul knows himself that faith is the treasure in the field, the pearl of great worth. His faith gave Paul the driving passion to share the good news to "the ends of the earth". He so wants the chosen people to allow God to guide their story, just as God had guided his, to find a saving relationship with Jesus.

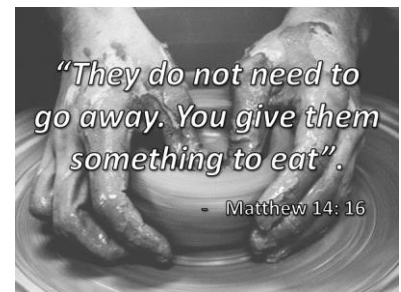
As we take a moment to consider our own faith journeys, I invite you to think about past or even current anguishes in your faith, in your family, in the church. Even though we experience times of anguish, as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we choose to remain in relationship with God and we continue to be a part of the family of God. And yet we too can lament times when people we know and love do not accept Christ. We bear sorrow when there are seasons of time spent away from the faith or when situations happen where there is a failure of faith. Paul is feeling sorrow and some grief for the people of Israel.

In "Toy Story 2" it was Woody who felt anguish and sorrow. He first felt it in the excitement leading up to the annual week at Cowboy Camp. Andy accidentally tore Woody's arm. This led to Woody staying home and to being "shelved" by Andy's Mom. This brought a great sadness upon Woody. In his state of despair, Woody has a dream about being tossed aside and thrown away. In the dream Andy tells him "You're broken" before tossing him into a trash can full of broken toys. As Woody struggles, he sinks down into the toys. Suddenly he awakens with a scream. Then, in a valiant attempt to rescue a broken Squeezy from such a sad fate, Woody falls off the dog and is stolen away by a greedy toy dealer. It was in the dealer's apartment, when he saw the full collection, that Woody began to become enamored with the things of this world – with popularity and fame. He lost his focus on what really mattered. We too can end up there. In times when we are adrift from what really matters – from our faith – that the things of this world can suddenly seem bright and shiny. Instead of seeking to re-engage in our relationship with God we can pursue what Woody sought – new friends, a new place in life – plus other things too - new cars, new cell phones, and so on.

Turning to our passage from the gospel of Matthew, the focus is on the feeding of the five thousand. Part of this story is also about discerning what really matters instead of being drawn to the things of this world. Instead of focusing on concerns around how to feed this mass of people, Jesus invites the disciples and us to focus on allowing God to be at work in our lives. In the story line that plays out in the book of Matthew, at the start of Matthew 14, John the Baptist is beheaded. Jesus hears the news and leaves in a boat, heading to a remote area so that he can be alone for a time. But we read that when the crowds heard

where Jesus was headed, they set off on foot to meet him there. As the boat comes to shore, Jesus sees the large crowd that has gathered in this remote place. Now, remember, Jesus has sought to be alone, to have some space to process the grief he is feeling over the death of his realtive, John the Baptist. But the crowds have followed him. Instead of being angry that they have intruded into his personal time, Jesus *"had compassion on them and healed their sick"*. We know that this is why many in the crowds followed Jesus – for the miracles. As Jesus works his way through those seeking his healing touch, the hour grows late. And they are in a remote place. So, the disciples come to Jesus and say, *"This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves"*. This seems like a practical and logical request. It may have even been a loving thought, showing care and concern for the people.

Yet Jesus does not see the situation this way. Instead, turning the tables on the disciples, **Jesus says to them**, *"They need not go away; you give them something to eat"*. Jesus us saying, *'Instead of sending them away so they or someone else can care for them, you care for them. You take care of them'*. The disciples offer a meager protest, citing their limited resources: we have nothing but five loaves and two fish. They are implying, what in the world can we do with this when the crowd is so large? It would be like feeding all of you from a small cooler. It is a legitimate question. Really Jesus, what can five loaves and two fish do for a crowd of over 5,000 households?

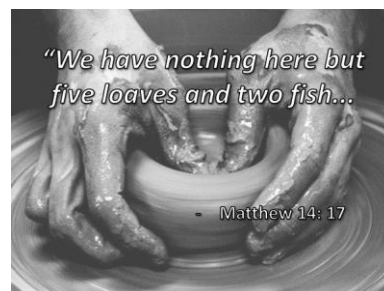


The disciples see their own limitations, not God's possibilities. So often I think we do too.

In the passage for today verse sixteen comes right after verse fifteen. *'Well, yes it does, Pastor John'* is probably what some of you are thinking. 12, 13, 14, 15, **16**, 17... But here is my point. When we are reading a scripture passage, most often we read things as a steady progression. In a block of text, we assume that one thing comes right after another. But in this passage, I cannot help but think there was at least **a long pause between the disciples' statement** and Jesus' response. *"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish"....*

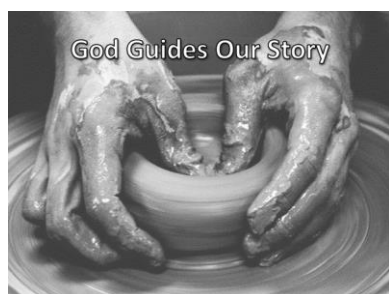
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"Bring them here to me". What happened in that "..."
time? What were the disciples thinking? What was Jesus thinking?



Jesus takes the fish and the loaves, blesses them, and has the disciples begin to distribute the meal. It is reminiscent of the feeding of the multitude in the desert – when God provided manna for the people. Every morning there was new manna. It never ran out. The crowd there that day with Jesus and the disciples ate their fill. No one was left hungry. Then the disciples gather up what was left over. Did you catch that there were twelve baskets of broken pieces left over?

The general lesson for us today in this teaching from Matthew 14 is that our faith is all about our willingness to offer God what we have and then to trust God to multiply it. It connects back to last week's story of the yeast and the mustard seed. When we allow God to work in our story, our faith will grow and grow, and it will spread to affect every area of our lives. As the crowd, and especially as the disciples, come to grips with what has just happened in the feeding of the five thousand, they are getting a taste of what life could be like when they allow God to guide their story. Again I ask, is it a coincidence that there were twelve baskets of broken bread left over? Twelve? Was God hinting into the disciples' future story? Each will end life broken, dying for their faith in Jesus Christ.



It is during moments of brokenness that God often begins to reveal our story too. Back in February of 2012, I went into work on a normal Tuesday morning as the associate pastor at First United Methodist Church just down the road in Rapid City. It was at about 1:00 that I found out that there would be a reduction in staff and that I would soon be serving a new church - somewhere else. After 24 years at that church, God was sending me out to someplace new. Excitement and anticipation would not be the words I would use to describe my immediate emotions. I did not want to live into my new reality. I wanted to stay where I was, to remain with the people I loved, with the church I loved. That was how Woody first felt when Jesse and the "Roundup" gang asked him to stay and to go with them to the museum in Japan. In their minds, there they would be adored by generations to come – "forever" they said. But all Woody wanted to do was be with Andy and the other toys he had known all his

life. In his heart, Woody knew where he belonged, where his purpose was fulfilled. In the end, that is what wins out. For Paul, that is his hope too – that in the end, the Jews will open themselves up to God guiding them to a life lived in Jesus Christ. Paul knew that for the Israelites, true life would only be found in Jesus. That was where they belonged, where they would find their true purpose. And Jesus himself knew that for the disciples, true life would only be found when they fully trusted in God to lead and guide their lives and their story. Paul himself was radically changed once he came to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. That was his deepest hope and desire for the Israelites, for God's chosen people. Jesus lived a life of total obedience to God, allowing God to fully guide his story. That was his deepest hope and desire for the disciples too – that they would allow God to fully guide their stories as well. The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 revealed to them what God will do when they trust fully in God. It is that trust that they will allow themselves to be drawn deeply into God's story.

Feed 5,000 men and their families with five loaves and two fish? Preposterous? Maybe. Crazy? Slightly. Far beyond anything we could ever imagine? Yes. Outside of anything we would ever consider possible? Absolutely! Yet Jesus and the disciples fed 5,000 men plus their households with five loaves and two fish. My friends, what might happen in our church if we really allow God to guide our story? What might happen if your life if you allow God to fully guide your story? Let us pray...



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) Grow. How has your faith grown as you allowed God to guide your story at points in your life? How can you share these experiences as a way to encourage and strengthen others?
- 2) Pray. Where might God be guiding you and your faith? Pray for God's guidance and discernment.
- 3) Study. Read John 13: 54-58. When has your unbelief limited God?