

A FUTURE WITH HOPE: NURTURE COMMUNITY

Luke 9:12-17

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September 11, 2001 started as a beautiful day in Gander, Newfoundland - just as it was here. Just as it was in New York.

Gander's population on September 11 was 11,000. By the next day it had grown by more than 50%, as 38 planes were diverted to its airfield, unloading 6,700 passengers. Some of those passengers had been on a plane for 30 hours, they'd heard bits and pieces of rumors about what had happened in New York and DC and Pennsylvania - they had not been in touch with their relatives. They came from all over the world, 95 countries to be exact. 6,700 guests arrived in Gander, a town with 500 hotel rooms.

The community of Gander responded with amazing, generous, extravagant hospitality. Their story is told in the musical called, "Come from Away." I know many of you saw it when it played in Cleveland as part of the Broadway series. Doug and I saw it on TV last month when it was streaming after the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

None of them knew how long it would be before the planes would fly again. The people of Gander and the surrounding communities didn't know. The passengers and crew didn't know. And that uncertainty increased the stress of the whole situation.

You can hear the stress in the disciples' voices at the beginning of our passage for today. The story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is one of the few stories that occurs in all four gospels. It's told a little differently in each. Today we hear the story from Luke who has the disciples saying to Jesus, at the end of a long day, "Send

the crowd away so that they can go to the nearby villages and countryside and find lodging and food, because we are in a deserted place.”

We can understand the disciples’ feelings, can’t we? They were tired, they were overwhelmed. They knew there was no way they could provide for the huge crowd that had gathered. It’s possible they were even trying to protect Jesus who had been teaching and preaching all day.

What we hear in the disciples’ voices is understandable. We hear in their words some of what’s called the NIMBY response - NIMBY stands for Not In My Back Yard. We know that we need more affordable housing, but we don’t want it in our neighborhood. We know that the county needs more addiction treatment centers, but surely not in Avon Lake, or Avon, surely not in my neighborhood.

Jesus would have none of it. He looks at the disciples and immediately says, “You give them something to eat.”

Imagine being one of those disciples on the hillside that day. You have 5,000 people and you have no food. Well, ok, you have five loaves of bread and two fish.

Beulah Cooper was the treasurer of the Ladies’ Auxiliary for the Royal Canadian Legion in Gander - kind of like working at our American Legion. When she first heard that plane after plane after plane was landing in Gander, she said, “Thank God they’re coming here, because I know they’ll be looked after! I always say, ‘if I run out of beds, I’ve got lots of floor space.’”

As it turns out, there were lots of people like Beulah in Gander. Doors opened, hearts opened. Claude Elliott, the mayor of Gander, flitted from place to place, checking on all of the different locales that were offering food and shelter. He didn’t go

home for five days. Looking back on it, he says, "We started on September 12 with 7,000 strangers in our town. We ended up with 7,000 family members."

It's a feel-good musical, and I highly recommend it to you. But there was nothing easy about the real-life situation. The local bus drivers had been on strike for weeks, but when they realized what was happening they left the picket line and soon 60 busses were taking passengers to homes, schools, churches and other make-shift shelters in nearby towns.

Families were kept together. Many places set up special rooms for families with babies and small children where portable cribs were assembled, and boxes were filled with toys and games. Diapers, bottles and formula were provided, all free of charge.

When calls went out for food and bedding, people emptied their cupboards, refrigerators, and closets and went to the airport. "They were there all night long," remembers Captain Beverly Bass, an American Airlines pilot. "The grocer, the postman, the pastor - ordinary citizens of Gander just showed up to help."

Remember this was right after 9/11 when no one really knew exactly what had happened or whether or not other acts of terrorism might follow. The passengers weren't allowed to take their luggage off of the flights, so they had no clean clothes or toiletries. The residents and businesses of Gander supplied all that they had.

Many guests didn't speak English and had no idea what was happening. Locals and U.S. soldiers scrambled to provide translation services as best they could.

The local phone company set up phone banks so that all the passengers could call home. Cell phones were not yet common in 2001, but those who had them shared them. People who needed prescriptions received what they required, at no cost.

One of the characters in “Come From Away” is a Muslim man, treated very suspiciously by all, as you might imagine. He is a chef back home in Egypt and wants desperately to use his culinary skills to help feed the masses. Finally he earns the trust of some of the volunteers in the kitchen and is able to find joy sharing his talents, feeding his fellow passengers.

Jesus said to his disciples, Seat them in groups of about fifty. They did so, and everyone was seated. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them, and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. Everyone ate until they were full, and the disciples filled twelve baskets with the leftovers.

What do you call it when five thousand people are fed on the spur of the moment? Do you call it a miracle? Do you call it an example of the kind of abundance God wants us to experience in life? Generosity? Extravagant hospitality? Do you call it love?

As Ed put it in his Moment for Mission, we believe in a God who makes the Impossible Possible.

The story of the people of Gander helps us remember that there is still so much goodness in the world. The hospitality inspired by Jesus’ command to the disciples on the hillside reminds us that with God, all things are possible.

We are called to live in hope, to work together to build a better future for our planet, for our children, for all that God has created and loves.

How do we keep hope alive in these days? By being very intentional. It’s not just going to happen. We intentionally need to care for ourselves, spend time in

pursuits that bring us joy, engage in practices of spiritual growth and meaningful service, and nurture our relationships with one another.

I believe that the world needs the church when we are at our best. Our world needs the values we lift up, values of justice and compassion. Our wider community needs the Avon Lake United Church of Christ. We are vital partners with those on the front lines of assistance for those who are most vulnerable. We are supporting those who feed the hungry, house the homeless, and advocate for those who have been victims of domestic violence. We are providing hands-on care to those who need a listening ear, and those wounded by grief and loss.

We are teaching our children about the power of empathy. Our youth on mission experiences learn about mutuality, that the fates of all God's creatures are linked, and so the only answer is working together, side by side, learning from each other's life stories.

Sitting at home alone, watching the news, we'll feel overwhelmed with despair and hopelessness. But together, we can make a difference. We can turn impossible into possible. We've seen it done before. It happened on a hillside in Galilee and in a small town in Canada. It happens here every day, in large and small ways, as we grow people to serve God and others.

In her poem, "The Hill We Climb," Amanda Gorman writes:

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,

that even as we grieved, we grew,

that even as we hurt, we hoped,

that even as we tired, we tried,

that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.

Not because we will never again know defeat,

but because we will never again sow division.

Scripture tells us to envision

that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree

and no one shall make them afraid.”

Amen.