

Isaiah 55:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

Romans 9:1-5

“The Lord is near to all who call; to all who call on God in truth.” AMEN!

(Sing) “If God had a name

What would it be?

And would you call it to his face?

If you were faced with him in all his glory

What would you ask if you had just one question?

And yeah, yeah God is great

Yeah, yeah, God is good

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

What if God was one of us

Just a slob like one of us

Just a stranger on a bus

Trying to make his way home” (Pause)

That song, “What if God was one of us?” by Joan Osborne suggests something

that is entwined in our reading today.

God in the most unlikely of people.

And I'd like to share two stories to illustrate.

The first one has to do with Jesus'
feeding of the 5,000 plus women and children.

There was probably a good 10,000 people there that day.

Many in need of healing and many in need of
community support following the death of
John the Baptist.

And, what catches me in particular in
the gospel reading is Jesus' words to
his closest followers.

Those words, "You give them something to eat."

That command to the disciples from Jesus
reveals to me that Jesus knew God was
inside those disciples.

Then in Isaiah we read,

"Anyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!"

God gathered around the sharing of food

where people, who have no money, are able to buy
and eat. (Pause)

Mara counted the coins several times.

It was as if she'd expected to find some more,
but it was still the same 3 coins.

As the crowd began to thin, she knew the best
produce would be taken, but she could only
afford the leftover bread anyway.

If she got ingredients for the bread
she might stretch what she had
a little further.

As she considered this, she noticed a child.

He sat with knees pulled to his chest and
watched the people pass by.

He didn't say anything because he'd already asked
and had learned their answers.

Mara felt the weight of the coins she had.

Barely enough for herself.

She looked away and went to the baker's stand.

But something kept her from going all the way there.

Mara turned back and went to the child.

“Have you eaten today?” She asked.

He shook his head.

Mara opened her hand to look at the coins.

She could still change her mind.

She was hungry too.

She put two of the coins into the child’s hand and said,

“Go to the baker’s booth and ask
for yesterday’s bread, and
it will be enough.”

The boy ran to the baker.

Mara stood slowly,
now holding only one coin,

she went to buy a handful of barley -
less than she hoped, but more than nothing.

That night her meal was thin.

She ate it slowly, stretching out each bite,
listening to the quiet in her home.

Then a knock came at the door.

When she opened it, the boy stood there,
holding half a loaf of bread.

“They gave me extra and I could not eat it all,” he said.

Mara looked at the boy and then the bread.

“Come in,” she said.

They sat breaking the bread between them.

It wasn’t a feast.

By the world’s measure it was not abundance,
but as they ate, Mara realized something
had changed.

She still had little.

But it no longer felt “small.” (Pause)

You see, the thing about Jesus’ encounter
with the large crowd, and their need for healing,
community, and food -

was that they were ongoing needs.

They’d get hungry again, they’d get sick again and

one day die, and there are always needs for them to have community.

And so this calling comes to those who follow Jesus, to continue what he began.

We too are called to give them something to eat, to heal, and to have compassion enough to

welcome strangers into community because God is in us.

It is our mission to continue what Jesus did in the wilderness because God is also in

those who are hungry, and sick, and grieving, and God is in the midst of all need community. (Pause)

The second story I'd like to share has to do with the text from the Letter to the Romans.

Pastor Ethan always believed that he understood the boundaries of God's love.

He knew God wasn't small, but God's love had edges.

There was the right name, the right creed, the narrow path and Pastor Ethan preached it that way with conviction.

Not harshly, but clearly because the truth mattered and he felt responsible for it.

One summer his church partnered with a local shelter
and volunteers went to serve meals twice a week.

That was where Pastor Ethan met Samir.

Samir was soft spoken,
with a steady kindness and awareness
that seemed to settle tension in a room.

He was there almost all the time;
arriving early and staying late.

Remembering names and listening to stories
while others hurried past.

Ethan noticed all this.

One evening during clean up Pastor Ethan
asked Samir which church he belonged to.

Samir smiled gently.

“I don’t, exactly. I’m Muslim.”

Ethan paused, mid wipe.

He nodded politely but something inside him tightened-
the old reflex regarding his view of truth.

“I see.” Ethan said.

But he really didn't, but as the weeks passed
and they worked side by side,

Ethan noticed things he could not explain away.

The first was Samir's commitment to prayer.

Quietly before serving, he'd utter words Ethan
didn't understand but the posture the reverence,
the humility were familiar.

More than familiar, they were true.

One night a man came late to the shelter begging
for food after the kitchen had closed.

He got angry and loud when volunteers shook
their heads, some withdrew, but

Samir stepped forward and spoke calmly,
listened without interrupting, and then
disappeared into the back room.

Moments later he returned with a plate
he'd set aside for himself to eat.

"Take mine," he said to the hungry man.

The man's anger dissolved and then with a soft nod,
he took the plate and sat down to eat.

Pastor Ethan stood frozen.

Later, as they walked out into the night Ethan asked
Samir why he gave away his meal.

Samir looked at Ethan puzzled.

“He was hungry.”

“Yes, but so were you.”

Samir gave a little shrug and said,
“I’ll be hungry for a little while.
That’s not the worst thing.”

After a few more steps together Samir went on,
“In Islam, we are taught that when you feed
someone in need, it is though
you are serving God.”

Ethan jolted to a stop because the words struck him,
not because they were new but because
he’d just preached that same message.

Many times!

That night he was unable to sleep and
he turned to the passage in the
Letter to the Romans that we read today.

Suddenly Paul's words made sense.

God's mercy is not a closed circle,
nor is God's love a guarded house with
a narrow door where only a few can enter.

Just before he settled to sleep he prayed.

"I see, Lord, where you have met me and
have a glimpse of what you're teaching...

I have made your love too small and
your mercy limited to those you've created and love."

Ethan realized that, before, he thought
such a testimony meant that he'd abandoned
his faith,

but now he sees that's not true.

It's the opposite, really, for he felt drawn
deeper into his faith,
because something had shifted.

For God's love, mercy, and compassion are
not limited by human boundaries. (Pause)

What if God was a stranger on the bus...
a slob like one of us...

God is.

AMEN!