

SHARE & SHARE ALIKE

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Deuteronomy 14: 22 & 28-29 Matthew 14: 13-21

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On May 10, 1940, after eight months of virtual stalemate between Hitler's German army and the English/French forces, the Nazis launched a devastating *blitzkrieg* attack on France that managed to separate the British Expeditionary Force from the main body of the French army. With 400,000 British troops marooned in a tiny corridor of northern France near the port town of Dunkirk, Hitler inexplicably stopped his army's advance.

It was in that moment of hesitation, on May 27, that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill launched Operation Dynamo—the evacuation of the Allied troops. On the first day, only 7,669 troops were saved by the beleaguered British fleet. So, Churchill put out an appeal for smaller civilian craft to join the rescue mission, and by May 31, nearly 400 “little ships” had joined the effort. At the height of the rescue, about 180,000 Allied troops were brought back from France in just three days.

There is a story, probably apocryphal, but nonetheless on point, that one wealthy Englishman who was using his yacht in the effort, looked over the side of his impressive boat to see a man in a canoe, paddling for all he was worth toward the French coast. He yelled to the canoeist, “What do you expect to accomplish with that thing?”

The man continued paddling and hollered back, “I expect to save one British soldier.”

By June 4, when Operation Dynamo ended, 338,226 British and French soldiers had been saved from Dunkirk in nine days. All because the British people chose to share what they had—from the richest to the humblest—to help those in need.

The story of the feeding of the 5,000, as Matthew tells it, makes much the same point: amazing things can happen when we are willing to share our resources as our Lord bids us do—whether those resources are great or small.

SHARING IN THE NEWS

Health insurance has been much in the news of late. And when you think about it, health insurance is just another form of sharing. For 38 years before I retired, my church and I contributed to the conference insurance plan every year. That is, we all put our money into a big pot called an insurance company, which then invested our money. Some of the returns on those investments they kept for themselves—to pay their employees and their stockholders. The rest was used to pay for the medical needs of the conference clergy and their families.

There were years when Jean and I didn't have any medical needs other than an annual physical. Then we had two kids, and the needs tended to multiply, but rarely did they amount

to the money that the church and I paid in, not to mention the return on the investments of that money.

We were okay with that. We didn't mind sharing our resources so that other clergy members of the conference could have the medical treatments and services they needed—treatments that might, in fact, save their lives or the lives of their loved ones. We figured that eventually one of us would need some expensive medical services, and the money that younger, healthier people put into the system would help cover our expenses.

Rarely, if ever, did we hear anyone complain about not getting their money's worth from what they paid for insurance—or that other people were benefiting from their contributions. Everyone seemed to understand that insurance was a system based on sharing. We share with you when you are in need, and you share with us when we are in need. That was our national health policy.

Now, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, we are engaged in a great civil war to test whether that idea, the idea of sharing, can long endure as the basis for a national health policy.

Some say that all such government programs should be voluntary. People shouldn't be required to share with others, they say. Sharing is an act of charity, and it should be left to those who feel like sharing. Those who don't feel like sharing should not be made to share.

Others claim that paying for national defense against foreign powers is not voluntary. Even Quakers, Mennonites, and pacifists still have to pay their taxes, some of which go to the military. Why, they ask, should our national defense against disease and injury be voluntary when the other kind is not?

Neither is the education of our children a voluntary thing. Whether we want to or not, we are required to see to our children's education up to age 16. Our national security depends upon an educated public, so we require everyone to get at least a rudimentary education.

We do not leave it up to who feels like learning to read and who doesn't. Everyone must if they are able.

We contribute to roads we never drive on, airports we never fly in or out of, national law enforcement to which we never appeal, and inspections of foods and drugs we never consume. I have never ridden a carnival ride at the state fair, but I am required to pay taxes that help make sure those rides are safe. My kids are in their forties, and my grandchildren go to schools in a district where I do not live. So why should I be required to pay for a school levy in my community?

Why don't we just leave the funding of all these things up to those who use or benefit from them? Why don't we turn it over to people who feel charitable and are willing to pay for these things?

Because these programs are too important to leave to chance. And because we all benefit from living in a country with well-maintained roads, safe foods and drugs, safe amusement park rides, and a literate citizenry.

It's all too important to wait and hope that someone will be willing to contribute to the cost of good roads for those who can't afford to pay for them. Education is too important to wait and hope that people who believe in education will be willing and able to help pay for the education of children whose parents can't afford to pay for it.

Much of what we enjoy in this free land is available to us because we hold the idea of sharing as a great and high value. And, to a substantial degree, we have received that value from scripture.

SHARING IN THE BIBLE

The dual values of kindness and generosity are upheld in the Bible more than any others. They are the very essence of what Paul describes as love in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (Vss. 4-7)

In the 145th Psalm the psalmist attributes those values to God.

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made...The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down...The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. (Vss. 8-17)

The prophets do not rest from commending kindness and generosity as God's wish and command for God's people. A list of all the prophetic passages that call for kindness and generosity would be too long for our purposes here, but let a single verse from Micah make the point: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)*

In the gospel of Luke, when asked how to repent, John the Baptist answers this: *"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."* (3:11) Interestingly, he does not direct them to make some kind of sacrifice, but rather to share their excess.

In Deuteronomy, sharing is so important that God writes it into the law that rules the lives of the early Hebrew people: *Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year... At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the*

foreigners, the orphans, and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. (14: 22, 28-29)

And now, on this Sunday, we are given this story of the feeding of the five thousand, one of six versions that appear in the gospels. Mark and Matthew have two, most scholars holding that the feeding of the four thousand is, virtually, the same story. Whether or not this is a historical account of an actual event, it is, most certainly, a parable that makes a serious and undeniable point about the power of kindness and generosity in our lives. As Native American storytellers used to say, “I don’t know if this story really happened or not, but I know it’s true.”

You are familiar with the story, so we will move quickly through it, making only a couple of stops to look at details:

In every version of the story, Jesus and the disciples find themselves with a great multitude of people whom Jesus has been teaching and, in some cases, healing. The day is growing late, and the disciples are afraid that the people will realize they are hungry and, when no food is available, things will get ugly.

They come to Jesus and suggest that he cut the lessons short and send the people away, but he, never one to let a teaching moment go by, challenges them to feed the crowd.

The disciples argue that this is an absurd demand. They do not have nearly enough money to buy the necessary food, and the only food they have with them is two fish—probably smoked—and five loaves of bread. While this would have been a virtual feast for a small family back then, it is as nothing before a crowd of 5,000 men and their families.

In the gospel of John, it is not the disciples but a “boy” or “young man” in the crowd who brings forth the loaves and fishes. This difference in the gospel accounts lends itself well to much exploration and preaching, but that will have to be left to another sermon on another day, as today we are in the gospel of Matthew.

Receiving the bread and fish from the disciples, Jesus does three things. First, he organizes the people. That is, he creates a sense of order and structure. Second, he blesses the food. He turns it over to God and dedicates it to God’s purpose. Then, third, he gives it away.

Wait, what?

Yeah. He gives it away. No filling out of forms in triplicate. No tests for authentic need. No tests to make sure these people really are hungry and aren’t just goldbricking and playing the system because they are too lazy to work. No. He just gives it away. The disciples take the little bit that they have, and they share it.

But the story doesn’t end there. Jesus adds an epilogue that gives the parable even more power.

We are told two things: first, everyone eats and is filled; and second, there are leftovers—12 baskets full. The gospels may disagree about some of the details in this story, but they all agree on these two things: everyone was full, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Twelve being a symbolic number meaning “a lot.”

The disciples had little, they turned it over to God and shared it, and it turned out to be more than enough.

SHARING GOD’S LOVE

The phrase “share and share alike” was, originally, a legal concept. It can be traced back to the mid-1500s and meant “to be divided into equal portions.” The word “share” was a noun, and the phrase would be used something like this: “The estate was divided between the four surviving children, share and share alike.”

Over time, however, the meaning of the phrase changed. The word “share” evolved into a verb, and the phrase “share and share alike” became another version of the golden rule. Roughly: “Share with others the way you would want them to share with you.” Or, more simply, “Be kind and generous with each other.”

The witness of scripture is that sharing is more than just a good idea. It is a requirement for all who wish to be numbered among the People of God. We share with others because God has told us to, and because Jesus, whom we call Lord, has given us the example of sacrificial sharing—in his teachings, in his life, in his death, and in his resurrection.

Several years ago, I accompanied a group of United Methodists on a trip to visit Project Chacocente in Nicaragua. Chacocente’s mission was, then, to bring families out of the Managua city dump, where they were living, and into the countryside near the city of Masaya. There, they were taught to live in a cooperative community. They received two acres of ground. They learned subsistence farming and small-business skills. And they were helped to build a simple house for their family. The community also had a school, a community center, and a church.

And they had a mission.

Having been helped, they decided to help others. So, every two weeks, they went to the men’s prison a few miles away to visit with the inmates, worship with them, and give them small bags of toiletries and other gifts. After the worship service, we were given these small bags and told to distribute them to the men who had come to worship, saying to each man, “*En el nombre de Jesucristo,*” as we gave him the gift.

En el nombre de Jesucristo. In the name of Jesus Christ.

Asked why this phrase was so important, we were told that we wanted the inmates to understand something: we were not giving the gifts because we are rich, or nice, or morally superior in some way. We were giving them because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We give them because he gave first to us, and because he tells us to give to others.

If, therefore, when I die, it is etched upon my tombstone, “**A kind and generous man,**” then I will have lived a life as God instructs us to live—a life that becomes the gospel.

En el nombre de Jesucristo.

Amen.