

## **Deuteronomy 10:12-19**

12 So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,<sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.<sup>14</sup> Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it,<sup>15</sup> yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.<sup>16</sup> Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.<sup>17</sup> For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,<sup>18</sup> who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.<sup>19</sup> You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

## **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.<sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.<sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

## **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.<sup>14</sup> When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.<sup>15</sup> 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.'<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'<sup>17</sup> They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'<sup>18</sup> And he said, 'Bring them here to me.'<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.<sup>21</sup> And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

## The Miracles We Take for Granted

I read this story online at a “Chicken Soup for the Soul” website. It’s a true story written by a young woman named Sharon Whitley. Sharon was a foster child. She had been one since she was two years old; she didn’t know her father, and her mom was not able to care for Sharon and her five sisters, and so they were each “placed” in different homes. She was lonely and scared, and the only way she knew how to express herself was by throwing tantrums, tantrums that caused her foster parents to send her back to the adoption agency, which had happened twice by the time she was six years old.

But during her third foster placement, she met someone very special. Her name was Kate McCann. Kate was a single woman who wanted to adopt a child, and when Kate came to Sharon’s home, Sharon was pretty sure that Kate would not pick her to be her adopted daughter. Sharon had pretty low self-esteem; two failed foster placements had convinced her that no one could truly love her.

Imagine Sharon’s surprise when her social worker informed her a few days later that Kate wanted to adopt her. Sharon must have been even more surprised when the social worker said that Kate was concerned that Sharon minded being raised by one parent instead of two. Sharon just wanted someone who would love her.

The next day Kate came out to meet with Sharon. She told Sharon that the whole adoption process would take about a year, but Sharon would be able to go live with Kate in a matter of days. While Sharon was excited, she was also afraid, afraid that Kate might change her mind once she’d experienced Sharon’s tantrums. Kate was able to sense Sharon’s fears. She hugged Sharon and said, “I know you’ve been hurt. I know you’re scared. I promise I will never send you away. We’re family now.” Sharon was surprised to see that Kate had tears in her eyes, and she realized that Kate was just as lonely as she was.

The next week Sharon met her grandparents, her uncles and aunts, and her cousins. She recalled how weird it felt to be with a bunch of strangers who smiled and hugged her as if they already loved her. She moved in with Kate soon afterwards. She got her own room, and Kate told her that she would soon take her out to buy her some new clothes. For the first time she could remember, Sharon went to bed that night feeling safe, and she prayed that she would not have to leave.

But Sharon couldn’t believe that all this could last. She was convinced that if Kate saw her worst side she would send Sharon away as her other “mothers” had done. And Sharon couldn’t stand living with this fear of being sent away, and so she was determined to push Kate to the edge, to force her to send her away sooner rather than later, just to get it over with, because the longer she stayed with Kate the harder it would be when she left.

And so she threw tantrums, she picked fights, she slammed doors, and she was determined to hit Kate if she even *touched* her. The odd thing was that Kate never tried to stop Sharon with force. Instead she'd hug Sharon and say that she loved her. Sharon stopped doing homework and started failing in school. One day when Sharon was watching TV Kate turned off the television and told Sharon she could watch TV *after* she did her homework. Sharon threw her books across the room and shouted, "I hate you! I don't want to live here anymore!"

Then she waited, waited for Kate to tell her to go and pack her bags. She waited, but the order never came. She asked, "Aren't you going to tell me to leave?" To which Kate responded, "I don't like the way you're behaving, but I'm not giving up on you. We're family, and families don't give up on each other."

That's when it finally dawned on Sharon; Kate loved her. Sharon cried and hugged her new and faithful "mom." Sharon's grades improved. Gradually the tantrums disappeared as did her fear of being sent away. Sharon was finally home, living with someone she could genuinely call "Mom."

The way that Kate reached out to Sharon is exactly the way that God reaches out to us. Last week we said that stewardship begins with the recognition that all things come from God, but I wonder if my focus on "things" may have made it sound like God was just a big vending machine, giving us lots of "things." The first point I want to make today is that *love* is greatest of all things God gives to us and it's the reason he gives us all things. He doesn't give according to our own virtue; he gives out of unconditional love. He gives as a good parent gives. He gives as Kate gives; lovingly and patiently, even when we act in ways that we might think would drive God to send us away. We see that love demonstrated in today's Gospel lesson. God is moved by compassion to send Jesus, and Jesus is moved by compassion to heal the sick, the physically and the spiritually sick, those who couldn't walk and those who couldn't love. His whole entry into this world is the result of God loving us beyond our ability to comprehend it, and all it desires is that we love God back.

And the second miracle we take for granted? It's that God moves us to love one another in the same way that he loves us. In a world that is hungry for food that nourishes both the body and the soul, we provide. When the Sharons of this world curse at us and beg us to send them away, and when we think that we've reached the end of our rope, the end of our patience with those who would curse us for our kindness we are able to take our small portion of patience, look up to heaven, thank God for what he's given us, and give it freely to those around us, only to discover quite miraculously that it *was* enough. And now someone who has been touched by our offering, by our faith, will reach out to the next person in need of some love and patience.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It's a day that testifies to the miracle I've just described as people around the world come together to break the bread that represents the body of Jesus that was broken for us, to drink the cup that represents the blood that was shed for us. This miracle of the feeding of the 5000 has played itself out for nearly 2000 years, resulting in the feeding of billions of people through the ages. And the miracle continues. Within our own church we who have been touched by the love of Christ have in turn reached out to touch others with the love of Christ, through outreach, missions, Sunday School, music, Vacation Bible School, movie nights, love baskets, advocacy for the poor and marginalized, and support for one another. Do you think any of this could have happened apart from God's amazing love for us? Do you think any of this could have happened apart from the love God has inspired us to share with others?

In a few minutes, Nick is going to share how the Holy Spirit, acting in this place and in this time, inspired him to reach out to others and how he sensed that divine communion as he shared table fellowship with people in Furcy I pray that the message that he shares with you this morning will inspire many of you to take those risks, to look at what God has given you, recognize that it is plenty, and be so inspired to share everything you have, your gifts, your time, your talents, your presence, your witness to God's amazing love, to all those around you who may need a little patience, a little hug, and a lot of love.