

MATHEW 14:1-21

ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN U.S. PEANUT COMPANIES IS CALLED “PLANTER’S PEANUTS”, AND THE STORY OF ITS FOUNDING IS AMONG A MULTITUDE OF NORTH AMERICAN SUCCESS STORIES.

AMEDEO OBICI, WHO STARTED THE COMPANY THAT IS NOW CALLED PLANTERS, WAS BORN IN ITALY IN 1876.

WHEN HE WAS ONLY ELEVEN HE LEFT HIS NATIVE LAND AND IMMIGRATED TO AMERICA. HE CARRIED NO MONEY, BUT ONLY A LARGE BAG OF PEANUTS, GIVEN TO HIM BY HIS MOTHER.

THE BOY ATE MOST OF THE PEANUTS ON THE JOURNEY, BUT STILL HAD A HANDFUL LEFT WHEN HE ARRIVED IN THE U.S. AND FOUND WORK.

HE WORKED HARD, SAVED HIS MONEY, AND LEARNED THAT WHILE AMERICANS LIKED PEANUTS, THERE WERE NOT MANY GROWN HERE.

HE FOUND A PLACE TO PLANT THEM; EVEN AS HE CONTINUED TO WORK AND SAVE MONEY.

WHEN THE CROP WAS HARVESTED SOLD THEM IN STAND UNTIL HE HAD ENOUGH MONEY SAVED TO BUY A HORSE AND SMALL WAGON.

HE CONTINUED TO SUPPLEMENT HIS INCOME BY SELLING PEANUTS, AND BY 1906 HE FOUNDED THE PEANUT COMPANY.

NOTICE – PLANTER’S PEANUTS WAS IN PART THE RESULT OF CERTAIN CHOICES AMEDEO OBICI HAD MADE.

INSTEAD OF EATING OR SELLING, OR SIMPLY GIVING PEANUTS AWAY, HE PLANTED THEM AND GREW MORE, WHICH ENABLED HIM TO MULTIPLY A HANDFUL OF PEANUTS INTO THAT PROFITABLE COMPANY.

THE THEME OF MULTIPLYING A SMALL AMOUNT INTO A VAST QUANTITY IS ALSO PART OF TODAY’S GOSPEL READING, WHICH COULD VERY WELL BE LABELED AS THE CHURCH’S FIRST “POT-LUCK SUPPER”.

BUT OF COURSE THE STORY IS MORE THAN A SIMPLE TALE OF THOSE WHO FOLLOWED JESUS ENJOYING A FELLOWSHIP MEAL. IT INVOLVES A NUMBER OF CHOICES- ONES MADE BY --JESUS, HIS DISCIPLES, AND THE CROWD.

JESUS WANTED TO BE BY HIMSELF, BUT THE CROWD CHOSE TO FOLLOW HIM-AND SO JESUS CHOSE TO MINISTER TO THEM.

THE DISCIPLES CHOSE TO REMIND JESUS THAT THE HOUR WAS LATE AND PEOPLE NEEDED TO BE FED. HE IN TURN CHOSE TO COMMAND THEM TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

THE DISCIPLES SHOWED JESUS FIVE LOAVES OF BREAD AND TWO FISH AND TOLD HIM IT WAS ABSURD TO THINK THAT IT WAS ENOUGH TO FEED THE 13 OF THEM LET ALONE OVER 5000 PEOPLE.

BUT JESUS CHOSE TO IGNORE HIS DISCIPLE’S DOUBTS AND COMMANDED THE PEOPLE TO SIT DOWN FOR THE MEAL.

THEN HE BLESSED, BROKE, AND GAVE THE FOOD TO HIS DISCIPLES TO DISTRIBUTE.

AS WE CAN SEE, THIS STORY IS POWERED BY A MULTITUDE OF CHOICES.

BUT EVEN BEFORE THIS AMAZING EVENT-THERE WERE CHOICES OTHER PEOPLE MADE THAT SET THE STAGE FOR THE MIRACLE OF LOAVES AND FISHES.

AS YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED, THE SETTING FOR THIS EVENT OPENED IN THE MIDDLE OF A STORY WITH THE STATEMENT:

“WHEN JESUS HEARD THIS HE WITHDREW FROM THERE TO A DESERTED PLACE BY HIMSELF.”

THIS BRINGS OUR ATTENTION BACK TO VERSE ONE OF CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

IT IS THERE WE LEARN IT WAS GRIEF AND PERHAPS A DESIRE FOR GUIDANCE FROM HIS FATHER THAT COMPELLED JESUS TO WANT BE ALONE.

INDEED, THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS A TURNING POINT FOR JESUS'S MINISTRY.

SO UPON HEARING THIS NEWS JESUS WISHED TO BE ALONE, HE WITHDREW FROM THE CROWD, BUT AS WE HEARD, HE WAS FOLLOWED IMMEDIATELY.

NEXT, THE RESULT OF CHRIST'S COMPASSION TOWARDS THE CROWD WAS NOT ONLY THAT HE SPOKE TO THEM, AND HEALED THOSE WHO WERE SICK.

IT WAS ALSO REVEALED IN HIS DESIRE TO FEED THEM WHEN THE HUNGER OF THE CROWD WAS BROUGHT TO HIS ATTENTION.

THUS WE COULD SAY- THE DEATH OF JOHN SET THE STAGE FOR THE MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES AND FISHES.

AND IRONICALLY, IT WAS A MEAL THAT BROUGHT ABOUT JOHN'S DEATH.

CONSEQUENTLY, IT MIGHT BE WORTHWHILE TO APPROACH TODAY'S FAMILIAR PASSAGE THROUGH THE ONE THAT PRECEDES IT.

INDEED, DOING SO, ENABLES US TO CONTRAST THE MEAL IN MATTHEW 14:1-12 WITH THE ONE DESCRIBED IN VERSES 13-21.

THE CHAPTER BEGINS WITH HEROD HAVING A BIRTHDAY PARTY.

AND, HIS INVITED GUESTS WERE NATURALLY ENJOYING A SUMPTUOUS FEAST, WHICH UNDOUBTEDLY COULD HAVE FED MANY, MANY MORE PEOPLE THAN WERE PRESENT.

JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS NOT AT THE FEAST, BUT IN A PRISON CELL.

HE HAD BEEN ARRESTED FOR ACCUSING HEROD OF SIN BECAUSE HE MARRIED THE DIVORCED WIFE OF HIS BROTHER.

JOHN TOOK ISSUE WITH THAT MARRIAGE BECAUSE ACCORDING TO THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS, SUCH A RELATIONSHIP WAS FORBIDDEN.

BUT HEROD'S DISPLEASURE WITH JOHN, WAS OVERSHADOWED BY A FEAR OF THE CROWD.

THE KING WORRIED HIS UNPOPULARITY, AS A ROMAN COLLABORATOR MIGHT GROW IF HE EXECUTED JOHN THE BAPTIST.

CONSEQUENTLY JOHN REMAINED A PRISONER. BUT THEN CAME THE BIRTHDAY FEAST AND HEROD'S DESIRE TO SEE HIS STEPDAUGHTER DANCE.

THE KING WAS SO FOCUSED ON HAVING HER DANCE THAT HE PROMISED HER WHATEVER SHE WANTED, IF SHE WOULD ONLY DANCE FOR HIM AND HIS GUESTS.

THE GIRL THEN WENT TO HER MOTHER FOR ADVICE, AND SHE TOLD HER TO ASK FOR THE HEAD OF JOHN THE BAPTIST- AFTER SHE DANCED FOR THE PARTY GUESTS.

THUS HEROD, WHO CRAVED POWER AND FEARED IT'S LOSS, FELT COMPELLED TO GRANT THE REQUEST-.

HE DID SO BECAUSE HE FEARED THAT GOING BACK ON HIS WORD WOULD HURT HIM MORE THAN KILLING THE BAPTIST.

AND SO JOHN DIED BECAUSE HEROD CHOSE WORLDLY POWER OVER GOD.

HEROD, IT COULD BE SAID, WAS AMONG THOSE ABOUT WHOM THE PROPHET ISAIAH ASKED:

"WHY DO YOU SPEND MONEY FOR THAT WHICH IS NOT BREAD, AND YOUR LABOR FOR THAT WHICH DOES NOT SATISFY?"

INDEED HEROD'S HUNGER FOR POWER, AND FEAR OF ITS LOSS, COULD NEVER BE SATISFIED- BECAUSE HE DEPENDED ON HIMSELF AND NOT ON THE LORD HIS GOD.

IN CONTRAST TO HEROD AND HIS GUESTS, THOSE WHO, AS ISAIAH ENVISIONED, ANSWERED JESUS' INVITATION- WOULD FIND FOOD FOR THEIR SOULS AS WELL AS THEIR BODIES.

THERE ARE MANY MORE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO DIFFERENT FEASTS DESCRIBED IN THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL.

THE MEAL HEROD PROVIDED WAS A GRAND FEAST FOR A RELATIVELY FEW, WHEREAS THE MEAL JESUS PROVIDED WAS A SIMPLE FEAST FOR A MULTITUDE.

HEROD'S MEAL DID NOT HONOR GOD, AND IT CULMINATED IN EVIL WITH THE DEATH OF AN INNOCENT MAN, WHILE JESUS' MEAL GLORIFIED GOD, BY PROVIDING FOR THE LIVES OF MANY SINNERS.

HEROD, WAS SELF-CENTERED, HE ORDERED JOHN'S DEATH BECAUSE HE WAS AFRAID OF LOSING EVEN A SMALL AMOUNT OF POWER.

BUT JESUS WHO, BY HIS INCARNATION SET ASIDE MORE POWER THAN HEROD COULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED, PUT THE CROWD BEFORE HIMSELF.

THIS MEANS HE FREELY EXPENDED EVEN MORE OF HIS POWER IN ORDER TO SERVE THE NEEDS OF OTHERS.

HEROD WAS TRICKED INTO EXECUTING JOHN, WHILE JESUS WAS MOTIVATED BY LOVE AND COMPASSION TO FREELY PROVIDE FOR THOSE WHO WERE HUNGRY.

AND ULTIMATELY, IT WAS HEROD AND GUESTS WHO WENT AWAY SPIRITUALLY EMPTY, WHILE THOSE FED BY JESUS WERE SATISFIED IN -- BODY, MIND, AND SOUL.

THUS IN A SUBTLE WAY MATTHEW CHAPTER 14 RAISES A QUESTION THAT EACH OF US MUST ANSWER:

WHICH FEAST AM I ATTENDING- THE ONE FROM WHICH I WILL LEAVE EMPTY, OR THE ONE THAT TRULY SATISFIES?

IN OTHER WORDS, DO WE RECLINE WITH HEROD AND WHAT HE REPRESENTS, OR INSTEAD DO WE SIT AT THE FEET OF JESUS AND FOLLOW HIM?

CHRISTIANS, BY OUR THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS, WILL ON OCCASION ANSWER SUCH QUESTIONS IN A WAY THAT EXPRESSES MORE OUR DESIRES THAN OUR DEEDS.

INDEED, SOMETIMES WE INTEND TO SIT AT THE FEET OF JESUS, BUT END UP RECLINING INSTEAD WITH HEROD----IN OTHER WORDS WE CONTINUE TO SIN-WE SELFISHLY TURN FROM GOD.

THE GOOD NEWS IS-THAT WHEN WE REPENT, WE NOT ONLY WILL BE FORGIVEN, BUT GOD'S SPIRIT WILL INSPIRE AND GUIDE TO TRY AGAIN.

BUT-IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO REALIZE THAT IT IS OFTEN OUR SMALL, SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT CHOICES- THAT END UP INFLUENCING LARGER EVENTS.

FOR EXAMPLE: HEROD'S WISH TO SEE HIS STEPDAUGHTER DANCE WAS A SMALL, SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT THING, AS WAS THE DISCIPLES MENTIONING TO JESUS IT WAS TIME TO SEND THE CROWD HOME FOR DINNER.

AND YET THE NET RESULT OF THOSE TWO REQUESTS FAR EXCEEDED THE INTENTION OF THE SPEAKERS.

THUS EVEN THE SMALL CHOICES WE MAKE IN LIFE ARE SOMEWHAT LIKE SEEDS PLANTED IN THE EARTH. OFTEN WE CANNOT BE SURE WHAT WE HAVE PLANTED UNTIL IT BEARS ITS FRUIT.

AND THE DANGER OF PLANTING SEED WE ARE NOT SURE ABOUT IS ALL OVER THE NEWS RIGHT NOW, WITH PEOPLE RECEIVING UNSOLICITED SEED FROM AN UNKNOWN SOURCE.

TRULY, THE DANGER OF PLANTING EVEN A FEW OF THOSE SEEDS MIGHT BE GREATER THAN WE REALIZE.

THIS HIGHLIGHTS THE BIBLICAL WARNING THAT WE REAP WHAT WE SOW.

CONSEQUENTLY, WE SHOULD BE EXTRA CAUTIOUS TO NOT SOW IN IGNORANCE OR GREED.

FORTUNATELY- JESUS DID GIVE US GUIDANCE FOR OUR SOWING WHEN HE SAID OUR FIRST COMMANDED IS TO LOVE GOD WITH OUR ENTIRE BEING.

THIS COMMANDMENT WAS COUPLED WITH THE ONE THAT REMINDS US TO LOVE OTHERS AS WE LOVE OURSELVES.

IN A SENSE, JESUS IS TELLING US TO TRY AND PUT OURSELVES IN THEIR SHOES, SINCE WE SHOULD NOT TREAT OTHERS IN WAYS THAT WE WOULD FIND HURTFUL OR HARMFUL.

MOTHER TERESA EXPLAINED LOVE IN THIS WAY: “LOVE IS A FRUIT IN SEASON AT ALL TIMES AND WITHIN REACH OF EVERY HAND. ANYONE MAY GATHER IT AND NO LIMIT IS SET.”

AND SOMEONE ELSE WHO WAS INSPIRED BY TODAY’S GOSPEL READING WROTE:

“LOVE IS A BASKET WITH FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISHES, IT’S NEVER ENOUGH UNTIL YOU START TO GIVE IT AWAY.”

AND, WHEN WE THINK ABOUT LOVE, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT THE KIND OF LOVE NAMED IN SCRIPTURE IS NOT A FEELING, BUT A CHOICE.

THIS KIND OF LOVE IS GOVERNED BY OUR WILL AND NOT OUR EMOTIONS.

INTENTIONAL LOVE REQUIRES NOT ONLY OUR WILL, BUT ALSO OUR WILLINGNESS TO PUT IT INTO PRACTICE.

AND PRACTICALLY SPEAKING, WHEN IT COMES TO THIS INTENTIONAL - BIBLICALLY DEFINED LOVE, IT IS ESPECIALLY TRUE THAT WE REAP WHAT WE SOW.

YEARS AGO I RECEIVED SEVERAL EMAILS THAT CONTAINED A THOUGHT PROVOKING DESCRIPTION OF SOWING AND REAPING, ENTITLED “YOUR PERSONAL GARDEN”.

IT LISTS THE KIND OF THINGS WE CAN INTENTIONALLY SOW IN THE GARDEN OF OUR LIVES SO WE MAY BEAR THE FRUIT OF LOVE, AS JESUS COMMANDS US TO DO.

THE INSTRUCTIONS SAY- FOR THE GARDEN OF YOUR DAILY LIVING PLANT: THREE ROWS OF PEAS- PEAS OF MIND, PEAS OF HEART, PEAS OF SOUL.

PLANT FOUR ROWS OF SQUASH- SQUASH GOSSIP, SQUASH INDIFFERENCE, SQUASH GRUMBLING, SQUASH SELFISHNESS.

ALSO PLANT FOUR ROWS OF LETTUCE- LETTUCE BE FAITHFUL, LETTUCE BE KIND, LETTUCE BE PATIENT, LETTUCE REALLY LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

THIS GARDEN NEEDS TURNIPS- TURNIP FOR MEETINGS, TURNIP FOR SERVICE, TURNIP TO HELP ONE ANOTHER.

TO SPICE UP OUR GARDEN WE MUST HAVE THYME- THYME FOR GOD, THYME FOR EACH OTHER, THYME FOR FAMILY, THYME FOR FRIENDS.

THE INSTRUCTIONS CONCLUDE WITH THIS PROMISE: WATER FREELY WITH PATIENCE, AND CULTIVATE WITH LOVE-AND THERE WILL BE MUCH FRUIT IN YOUR GARDEN BECAUSE- YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW.

LET US PRAY:

LORD, OPEN US ONCE MORE TO THE LEADING OF YOUR SPIRIT. WE PRAY WE MAY RECEIVE PATIENCE AND WISDOM TO MAKE THE BIG AND SMALL CHOICES, IN ALL AREAS OF OUR LIVES, WHICH REFLECT YOUR WILL. GIVE US THE HUMILITY AND THE COURAGE TO REPENT, AND MAKE BETTER CHOICES LARGE AND SMALL- WHEN WHAT WE HAVE CHOSEN LEADS TO SIN. IN CHRIST’S NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

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