

Story and Meditation: Unoriginal

July 25, 2021

2 Kings 4:42-44

John 6:1-21

by *Eric Anderson*

After some seasons together, raising a brood of chicks each year, the male in the 'apapane couple had a new and original idea.

"Let's build our nest without new twigs and grasses and lichens this year," he said.

She looked at him.

"How are we going to do that?" she asked, much more calmly than you might expect.

"Well, we might have to get a few things," he admitted, but have you ever noticed that the wind kicks up a lot of things? We should be able to retrieve what gets stuck in the leaves of our tree. It will be fine."

She looked at him.

And so they set out to build a nest without new materials.

It was slow going, especially at the beginning when they needed more twigs and such for the structure of the nest. He was sort of right; there were dried grasses and mosses caught in the branches of their chosen tree, but it was a lot less than would serve to build a nest. He got stubborn, too – I'm sure you know people who get stubborn from time to time (actually, I know you do, because I get stubborn from time to time) – he got stubborn and insisted on waiting for some critical pieces to appear rather than hunting for them.

It was slow going.

There came a morning, though, when two pieces of twig with about the right length and thickness appeared, carried there, it seemed on the morning breeze. The next morning there were one, two, three more. In fact, each morning from then on they found the twigs and the grasses and the mosses and the lichens, not in overabundance, but more regularly than they had before.

"Oh, good! The winds are picking up," he said.

She looked at him.

It was the next day, or rather evening, that the explanation became clear. The sun had gone down, and there wasn't much wind in the quiet dusk. The pair looked like they were asleep perched on their branches when the quiet was softly broken by the sound of wings.

She was awake. She looked around without moving to see what she'd expected: two of their children, adults now, placing bits of grass and moss in the branches. They were quick and quiet about it until they seemed to disagree about another collection round. "They'll need it," said the young female. "They'll catch on," argued her brother. Their voices rose for a minute as they argued, but they hushed themselves quickly and took off for one more load of grasses.

"Oh," said the father, the male 'apapane who'd insisted on finding everything in their tree. "They've been bringing us our materials."

She looked at him.

"Of course they have," she said.

"You knew?"

"I knew somebody must be."

"I guess we needed the help," he said.

She looked at him.

"I guess I needed the help," he said with somewhat greater accuracy.

"And aren't you glad they helped?" she asked, and he had to agree.

It is perfectly understandable to think of Jesus as the ultimate original. There wasn't anybody like him before; there wasn't anybody like him – except him, of course – during his ministry in Galilee. There hasn't been anybody like him since. All of that is true.

But at times, he could be remarkably unoriginal.

Robert Hoch writes at *Working Preacher*, "Biblical allusions abound in this chapter. John's account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand contains echoes of Elijah-Elisha stories (for example, 2 Kings 4:42-44) and allusions to the Psalms, especially Psalm 107:4-5, 23, and 28-30." Susan Hysten writes, also at *Working Preacher*, "The order of events: Passover meal, sea crossing, manna discourse, also might cause readers to perceive an allusion to the Exodus. By climbing the mountain and providing the meal, John situations Jesus as Moses, who facilitated the provision of food for Israel."

There on the mountainside, Jesus did what prophets before him had done. He did what poets had celebrated. He accepted the gifts presented to him, gifts clearly inadequate to the task, and he saw that the people were fed.

It wasn't original. It was effective. Hungry people were transformed into fed people. Needy people were transformed into satisfied people. Just like the hungry Israelites who ate manna in the wilderness. Just like the one hundred hungry people fed by the man from Baal-shalishah.

Interestingly, though Jesus clearly summoned the memories of Moses and the Exodus there on that mountainside, he also evoked the acts of Elisha and that unnamed man from Baal-shalishah. The miracle began with a contribution: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain offered to Elisha, five loaves and two fish offered to Jesus. These acts of giving created the foundation for what was to follow.

At ucc.org Cheryl Lindsay writes: "I do not question that Jesus had the ability to make the loaves and fishes multiply... and that could be the whole story. But I do find myself wondering... is the subversive miracle that Christ frees us from the mindset of scarcity to embrace the good news of abundance? Would it be an even greater miracle if after Jesus takes that bread and begins to distribute it... if others open up their satchels and shared what they had previously decided to keep only for themselves? Could the lesson be not just that Jesus can multiply, but that the miracle doesn't happen until we stop clinging to what we have and place it in God's hands?"

In a week when those whose personal resources eclipse the gross domestic product of 157 nations, in fact whose personal resources are greater than the gross domestic product of the bottom ten nations, in such a week I think that for human beings to stop clinging to what we have and placing it in God's hands might be the greatest miracle of all.

In this story of Elisha and this story of Jesus people whose names were not remembered played a crucial part. They gave. People ate. It's not possible to say that if they hadn't given, that people wouldn't have been fed, but it is certainly clear that when they gave people ate.

You and I have roles to play in God's work in the world. It may not look like much, in fact it may look as unlikely as "How can I set this before a hundred people?" or "but what are they among so many people?" Truthfully, that's the *most* likely scenario. You and I do not have the resources to feed five thousand – I might, in a pinch, feed a hundred. It would pinch, but you know, I could probably do it, if not with a banquet, at least with something for one meal.

It's why we pool our gifts here at the church. We might do as the early Christians did – rely upon the worshipers of our church for someplace to gather, to pray together, to seek the Holy Spirit together. I doubt if many if any of our homes has that kind of space, however. As soon as they could, Christians began building places to worship.

They also began assembling ministries. Christians built hospitals to care for the sick. They established kitchens and pantries to assist the hungry. They erected houses to shelter the

homeless. We still do these things. Today the United Church of Christ is substantially involved with debt relief for those impoverished by the high cost of health care and treatment not covered by insurance. Interfaith Communities in Action – Christian and non-Christian – has helped fund the long-term affordable housing units rising in Pahoā. This church provided solid and nutritious fresh meals for weeks during the 2018 eruption to those who fled the lava flows in Puna.

Gifts come together. When they do, things happen. We might even call them miracles.

There is one gift I ask of you today. I ask you, if you haven't already, to get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as you possibly can.

It's a small thing. It won't cost you any money. It will cost you about half an hour or an hour per shot, maybe – the lines aren't that long any more. It might cost you some side effects like fatigue or swelling or a painful shoulder. You might spend a day or two in bed.

And... you will feed your family and your neighbors with... health.

I had a phone conversation with educators from the Department of Health not too long ago. They are eager to enlist community organizations including houses of worship in the effort to encourage vaccinations. Some populations among our population are doing fine. Nearly all of those over 65 in the state have had their shots. Those over fifty, they tell me, are also doing well. But the 18 to 40 age group isn't doing so well. Individuals in that age range are less likely to develop serious illness from coronavirus, but already hospital beds around the country are re-filling. New cases are rising in the US, in the state of Hawai'i, and in Hawai'i County.

A vaccine, friends, is your contribution of five loaves and two fish. I know it doesn't look like much. I know it doesn't feel effective. If I get sick, what difference does it make? If I don't get sick, what difference does that make?

Well, here's the difference: If you don't get it, you won't pass it. If you don't get it, somebody else won't get it. If you don't get it, it won't start changing within you, developing some new strain that the vaccines won't prevent. If you don't get it, your kids won't get it, and their friends won't get it, and their families won't get it. There isn't a vaccine approved for keiki, remember. They are entirely relying upon us to protect them and to protect their families.

If you're concerned that you have a medical condition that makes a vaccine unwise, don't look it up on the Internet – consult your physician.

We have a part to play to create spaces for worship. We have a part to play to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. We have a part to play in healing the sick – and in preventing serious, even deadly illness in a global population.

We have a part to play. Bring your five loaves. Bring your two fish. And watch for God to make miracles happen.

Amen.