

The Good News Is ... Together, the Impossible Is Possible

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, March 15, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Mark 6:32-44](#)

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Eleven years ago today, we held our first worship service in this building. Six years ago today, we held our first one-line worship service. A novel corona virus was rapidly circulating around the world and gatherings were being discouraged. I sent an email to the congregation, encouraging people to stay home that Sunday and to connect to a Zoom meeting to which we would stream the worship service. There were a few people in the sanctuary; most of the congregation was on Zoom. It was a one-way worship service; what was happening in the sanctuary was streamed out to the Zoom “meeting.”

Within days, Alameda County was under a “shelter in place” order, and by March 22, Pastor Brenda and I were leading worship from our homes. It wasn’t long before we had multiple people leading from their homes. Jenny Lin started recording music at her home for us to use as preludes and postlude. We snagged recordings of hymns from YouTube, inviting people to sing along at home. Our time of prayer evolved so, once again, the prayers of the people would, indeed, come from the people. We celebrated communion weekly.

I remember feeling like I was a pastor fresh out of seminary, not really knowing what I was doing. Pastor Brenda and I started climbing a steep learning curve. A Presbyterian Pastor, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow (who, incidentally, will be our guest preacher the last Sunday of April), started holding Zoom meetings for clergy who were trying to figure out how to bring their communities together for worship and more, but to do it virtually. People were patient with themselves and each other as we learned and stumbled and did the best we could. And our community held together, even though we couldn’t be in the same room with each other.

When we started coming back in the sanctuary for worship, we kept the Zoom option for people who were sick, or who were uncomfortable going into spaces with many people, or who simply couldn’t get out of their homes. In many ways, our worship services became more inclusive and more accessible. For that, I’m very grateful.

I think that one of the reasons we held together as a community is that we continued to gather at 10:00 on Sunday mornings. We had a weekly appointment to be together with a common purpose, and that carried us through.

Our gospel lesson is a community story and a communion story (though it’s not a Last Supper story). The disciples have just come back from their first mission excursion. They are filled with stories and excitement. Jesus suggests that they take a little time away, that they go to a deserted place for rest and renewal. Getting away doesn’t work. They are recognized and people figure out where they’re going.

A crowd greets Jesus and the disciples. And when dusk falls upon the crowd that has followed them into the wilderness, the disciples urged Jesus to send the crowds back to their homes or at least into nearby villages so that they can get something to eat.

“Jesus responds bluntly to this attempt to solve the problem of scarcity by relying on market economics: ‘*You give them something to eat.*’¹ The disciples don’t get what he’s saying. They think he’s suggesting that they buy the needed provisions.

“While they agonize, Jesus organizes – and the numbers noted [at the end of the story] tell an important tale.”² First, we are told that there were 5,000 men there. That suggests that there were more than 5,000 people there, when you include the women and children. “Such a crowd would have been larger than all but the three largest cities in Roman Palestine, and up to 50 times that of a typical village ...”³

I don’t know about you, but I know that when I’m in a really big crowd, I can end up feeling very alone. The bigger the crowd, the more alone I am likely to feel. When Jesus orders the disciples to get the people to sit down in groups of 100 or 50, he’s telling the disciples to arrange the people in groups the size of the hamlet or village they came from. In villages and hamlets that size, people know each other. Jesus’ strategy seems to help them create a sense of community. Jesus’ strategy seems to be to get the crowd into groups that wouldn’t be so overwhelming.

I remember, three decades ago, being at a dinner with a few church families at one of their homes. One of the children, who must have been seven years old or so, faced a hamburger on his dinner plate it was easily bigger than his two fists put together. I could see he was starting to get overwhelmed. I surmised that he had been taught to eat what was put in front of him without complaint, especially when he was a guest at someone else's home. He didn't know what to do. I squatted down next to him, and whispered, “Would you like me to cut your hamburger in half?” He nodded, yes. I did, and somehow two half-hamburgers seemed much more manageable than one whole hamburger. Smaller sizes can be more manageable.

I say that this is a communion story because of what Jesus did next. Jesus took the bread (and the fish), blessed it, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples to give to the people. That’s the action Jesus takes at the Last Supper. Theologian Ched Myers says that we should read the story of the Last Supper in light of this story, not the other way around. Today’s gospel lesson is a story about economic justice, as is, Myers says, the Last Supper.⁴

I know that for some people, this story is about Jesus meeting needs when there isn't enough. For them, the miracle is Jesus’ ability to multiply the loaves and fishes. That’s fair. For me, however, the core of the story is the direction Jesus gives the disciples – and us: “*You give them something to eat.*” I can’t help but wonder if the miracle isn’t that Jesus

¹ Ched Myers, *Healing Affluenza and Resisting Plutocracy: Luke’s Jesus and Sabbath Economics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), 100.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

made bread and fish out of nothing. What if the miracle is that Jesus got people to share? And what if the lesson is that, when we share, sure enough, there's plenty?

As I said, this is a story also about community, those groups of 50 and 100. Over the past decade or so, I have become more and more convinced that community is the key. Community is what will heal our brokenness. Community is what will help us find belonging. Community is what will enable us to survive. Community is what makes the impossible possible.

Consider what ICE and CBP did in Minneapolis: They killed two US citizens on the streets while being filmed, they abducted children (including a little boy in a bunny hat), and they terrorized residents for over a month. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't provoke violence. The commitment by the Minneapolis community to nonviolent resistance protected us all from martial law.

And it took community to maintain that commitment.

Here's where all this gets difficult for me. My gifts do not include the gift of creating the informal, social spaces where community is built. I'm a good preacher and public speaker. I'm a good writer and teacher. I'm a good counselor and spiritual director. And I'm a crappy party host. I can organize a meeting and I can organize a protest, but don't ask me to organize a tea where people are going to sit together and get to know each other. Don't ask me to organize the coffee hour.

I know how important our fellowship time is after worship. We connect with each other there more than we do even at the communion table. There's a United Church of Christ congregation in Washington that had (and maybe still has) the motto "Christ takes form in a band of people." I love that motto. I love it because it's true. We need fellowship time to become that band of people.

Nelson Mandela once said something like, "It always seems impossible until it's done." And, in my experience, the thing that makes the impossible get done is when we do it together.

A couple weeks ago, I heard a clip from an interview with the Rev. Sen. Raphael Warnock, and what he said challenged me. He reminded me that 78 million of my neighbors thought electing Trump to a second term was a good idea. And Jesus calls me to love them. I'll tell you, on my own, that's impossible. And with community, it's possible. I need community that will encourage me and hold me accountable.

I need a community that spurs me to engage in the only cure for the "spiritual crisis that attends the body politic," as Sen. Warnock put it.⁵ That cure is love. We need love. We need the kind of love that spurs one into action. And we need the kind of love that builds community, for truly, the good news is that together, the impossible becomes possible.

Amen.

⁵ The Rev. Sen. Raphael Warnock on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/694773800142773> (re-accessed 9 March 2026).