



MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH

A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.

“MINISTRY FOR THIS LIFE”

Sermon Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore

Matthew 14:13-21, July 26, 2026

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hear these words from the great poet theologian, Annie Dillard [*For the Time Being*, 75-76]:

“One small town’s soup kitchen, St. Mary’s, feeds 115 men a night. Why feed 115 individuals? Surely so few people elude most demographics and achieve statistical insignificance. After all there are [340] million Americans. . . 16 million in greater New York City. . . . Every day 1.5 million people walk through Times Square in New York; every day almost as many people—1.5 million—board U.S. passenger planes. And so forth. **We who breathe air now** will join the already dead layers of us who breathed air once. We arise from dirt and dwindle to dirt and the [span] of the universe [makes us that much smaller].”

So, **why feed 115 individuals a night at the small St. Mary’s soup kitchen?** What difference does it make in a nation of over 300 million? In a world of 8 billion? In a universe that is 13 billion years old and whose expanse is greater than our human imaginations?

In our scripture passage today, Jesus is faced with a problem. Thousands of people had followed him out into the countryside. According to Matthew, Jesus had withdrawn from the towns after he heard about John the Baptist’s death. Taking a boat onto the Sea of Galilee, he thought he could find some solitude, but the people followed him around the lake. Matthew writes, “When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; **and he had compassion for them** and cured their sick.”

As evening approached, the disciples told Jesus to send the people away because it was a deserted place and there was no food for them to eat. The people needed time to hike back to the villages, where they could find food. Jesus told the disciples, “You give them something to eat.”

It was just one meal. Why make a fuss about feeding a huge crowd? What’s one meal, one evening in a universe 13 billion years old? What are 5,000 people in a world of 8 billion?

They complained that they only had five loaves of bread and two fish. “Bring them here to me,” Jesus said, and he told the crowds to sit down.

For the past two weeks, we've been focusing on this question of what it means to be a liberal church in the 21st century. Christianity has been evolving for 2,000 years; so, the fact that liberal Christianity has also been changing since the days of Fosdick and Marney should not surprise us. Today, I want to zero in on another word in our soon-to-be-changed tagline: justice.

Justice is a biblical idea. The Ten Commandments and the accompanying Mosaic Law were first conceived around the idea of justice. If you stumble through the oldest parts of the Mosaic Law—The Book of the Covenant in Exodus 21-23; the Book of the Law in Deuteronomy 12-26; and the ethical part of the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19—you will see that the ancient Israelites believed that God expected them to live justly, fairly with one another, in their new land. In particular, God expected them to protect the rights of the poor and of immigrants. This wasn't something they were to do in addition to their faith in God; **it was to be the foundation of their faith in God.**

Jim Wallis in his book *Faith Works* makes this point with some astonishing numbers regarding the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, often called the Old Testament, the poor are mentioned thousands of times. In fact, only idolatry is mentioned more often than the poor. "In the [Christian] New Testament, one out of every sixteen verses [have] to do with wealth and poverty. In the first three Gospels, the subject is in one out of every ten verses; in the Gospel of Luke, it is in one out of seven verses" [Wallis, 71-72]. Wallis mentions that US Congressional Representative Tom Hall in an address to Congress in 1997 stated that he had **"counted over twenty-five hundred biblical verses of direct teaching on the subjects of hunger and poverty"** [Wallis, 72-73].

With that kind of overwhelming biblical evidence, you would think that Christians of all denominations and traditions would be leading our country in a vigorous fight against poverty and homelessness and doing all they can to reduce the power of wealthy individuals and corporations who take advantage of the poor. **Unfortunately, we know that's not true.** As a consolation prize, if anyone criticizes you for **being in a liberal church, you can always say, "Well, at least my church follows the Bible."**

Now, that we are happy with self-congratulation, let's consider how the liberal church is changing in the 21st century regarding the mission of biblical justice. For much of the 20th century, mainline Protestants had enough power and wealth that they could create non-profit institutions and organizations to serve the poor and marginalized. For instance, the YMCA—the Young Men's Christian Association—began, not as recreational and fitness centers for middle-class folks, but as a Christian outreach to young men who had become lost in the urban, Industrial Age. Throughout the 20th century soup kitchens, homeless shelters, food pantries, and more became avenues to carry on ministries to those facing poverty and at first were solely funded by churches and other religious bodies.

Many of these ministries still operate today as non-profits, though many have changed their mission or have lost much of their church financial support. Take for instance Crisis Assistance, which directly supported over 18,000 families last year in Mecklenburg County and with every dollar donated channels 91 cents directly to financial aid for families in poverty. It's a great charity, and they are good stewards of the money they receive. Last year Crisis Assistance received almost \$19 million in revenue. Religious congregations gave \$900,000. That's right; churches and houses of worship gave less than 5% of Crisis Assistance's budget. Meanwhile, local government gave them \$4.5 million, roughly 25% of their budget—or 5 times what churches give. Most of the big charities in Charlotte, today, which began as church ministries, could not function without gifts from corporations, grants, or government support. Church donations are now only a minor part of their budgets.

This reality is forcing liberal Christianity to face two truths. One, churches are no longer powerbrokers. And two, individual giving to help people marginalized or struggling with poverty is not enough. Our gifts are swimming upstream in a river current of inequality that overwhelms our donations. This reality has been apparent for several decades, which is why liberal Christianity is changing in the 21st century. Liberal churches will continue to fund ministries and services for the poor and marginalized, and in addition will also be **advocating for changes to the systems in our country that deprive the poor of their wages and provide advantages to the rich who already have plenty**. Our call to justice is not just about giving out of our abundance; **it's about practicing a way of life**.

It's great to volunteer and financially support homeless ministries; it's better to do that and fight for changes to make housing more affordable. It's wonderful that we have a partnership with Pinewood Elementary School; it's better to do that and advocate for public education and for desegregation of our schools so we have less high poverty ones. It's a blessing that this church is "open to all; closed to none;" it's better to be that way and to resist the white nationalism that is rising up again in our country and to publicly resist the forces that wish to intimidate Blacks, Jews, Latinos, Asians, and immigrants.

Latin American writer, "Eduardo Galeano, once said, **'Justice is like snakes who only bite those without shoes,' which is to say, there is no justice for the poor**" [Stan Dotson, via email]. The 21st century liberal church understands this reality and advocates for a Christianity that impacts this world for all—shoes or no shoes.

The feeding of the five thousand is a miracle that didn't have to take place. In one sense, the disciples were right. All those people walked from their homes in the villages to follow Jesus to this secluded place along the Sea of Galilee. It's getting a little late in the afternoon, send them back home, the disciples said. That was the sensible decision. Besides, the disciples only had five loaves of bread and two fish.

“You give them something to eat,” Jesus said. Not because people would starve by missing one meal, but because this is what it means to be a Christian—to serve others in this life. That’s what those 2,500 passages in the Bible are telling us—this faith is about serving others in this life.

In the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God was near and traveled all over the countryside healing people and teaching them how to live in this life. Forgive 70 x 7 times; love your enemies; do not judge; turn the other cheek; treat others as you wish they would treat you.

The Gospel of John spiritualizes Jesus’ message and changes it from a ministry for this life into a quest for eternal life. Jesus talks and talks and talks in John’s gospel, but he’s always talking about himself, who he is. In the whole gospel, the whole book, he gives only one commandment. I’ll give a prize in Talk Back to the first person that tells us what it is—and don’t ask your phones.

Now, I’m not suggesting that we don’t read John’s gospel, or talk about eternal life, those are part of the biblical witness, but **21st century liberal Christianity is shifting to the biblical emphasis on ministry for this life**, by serving others in Christ’s name. And yes, at times it feels like we don’t have enough to make much of difference—we’ve only got five loaves and two fish—but we don’t have to do this alone. One of the gifts of losing power is that you realize you need to collaborate with friends. Last night, Magay and I joined some friends for a vigil in First Ward Park for those who’ve been murdered by ICE. There were a hundred and some people there; and there were hundreds of these vigils across the nation last night. We don’t have to minister alone. If we collaborate with other churches, other faiths, with people of good will but no faith, if we all share our five loaves and two fish, there’s no telling how many people God can feed. God is working in this world, now. Wherever we see love operating, let’s join the work.

What does it matter that the soup kitchen in the town of St. Mary’s feeds 115 people a night in a world of 8 billion people? Annie Dillard’s question may cause us to question all justice or charity work. Yet, her question was only a hook to reel us in. Later in *For the Time Being*, she quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote from a Nazi prison, **“Only by living completely in the world can one learn to believe.”** And then she quotes Teilhard de Chardin, “Plunge into matter. Plunge into God. . . . I can and I must throw myself into the thick of human endeavor, and with no stopping for breath” [*For the Time Being*, 171].

What does it matter that last night I joined a vigil for persons unjustly murdered by ICE agents? Or that in a couple weeks volunteers from our church will prepare meals for Roof Above? Or that a few days after that we will join in solidarity for the Pride parade?

This is about choosing how to live. Many look at the crowds and decide that's not my responsibility. Send them away to find food on their own. Others say, "Well, we've got five loaves and two fish. Let's see what we can do with that." Which choice will you make? The compassionate one? The one that creates miracles? How do you want to live?

"We live in all we seek," Annie Dillard says [172]. And there, we find life, in a ministry for this life. AMEN.