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

Last year, I read the best-selling book, There is No Place For Us: Working and Homeless in America. It is a powerful book and I commend it to you. I've known, as I'm sure many of you do, that housing in America is an increasing problem. Housing, especially rents, continue to increase in cost, while wages stay stagnant and even decline when we consider inflation. But, this book brought all of what I knew into an even starker reality. There are all kinds of statistics that are shocking and the stories really show how the system is tilted — landlords have lawyers, renters often don't. Vouchers exist, but landlords won't accept them. Families live in weekly motels, which the government doesn't count as homeless, so they can't get aid, but they pay more than apartment rent. And they can never save enough for the two- or three-month security deposits many landlords now require.

I could go on and on, but one of the big take-aways for me from the book was how incredibly hard it is for people to stay housed. So many people are constantly having to change homes for all kinds of reasons and that soaks up the little they can ever save and often means they end up homeless or doubled up with relatives or in motels. And besides the general frustration for the individuals who are dealing with this system, what is clear in the book, is that keeping people housed has far reaching benefits, of course, for the families where stability has obvious financial and emotional benefits, but also for all of us as a society.

When I finished reading this book, I felt very overwhelmed with how impossible the problem seems and really, what could I possibly do about the housing crisis in America? Still, I thought it was a book worth sharing, so, I took it to the mission committee and just asked them, did they think there was anything we could do to make a difference?

We decided maybe there was an agency somewhere doing rental assistance work and we could give some money to their work. It would be doing something at least. So, we went out to call agencies. At the next meeting, we discovered there just isn't much in the way of rental assistance happening in Racine. St. Vincent DePaul does some. Some churches help out on a case by case basis. And Racine Kenosha Community Action Agency had been doing this work, and still got around 30 calls a day, but their funding had run out. Not much to jump in on.

Then, out of the blue, I took a call from the adult child of one of our deceased members. They were looking to make a gift to Covenant in honor of their parent and hoped we could use it for a new mission initiative. Would \$5000 help us to do that?

Well, yes! We went back to Racine Kenosha Community Action Agency and asked, “could you start up again with \$5000?” What if it was \$5000 but we would try to raise more? And what if we raised more and promised to spread the word? What if we asked people to tell their neighbors, friends, and workplaces about this fund and how 100% of it will go to keep people in their homes? Maybe other people would want to participate. What if we reach out to other churches and ask them to join us? What if RKCAA took this initial seed money and used it as proof on grant applications that they had support for this work in the community? RKCAA was thrilled with the idea.

So, with our \$5000 seed money, the session approved the Mission Committees desire to start this new fund and to ask all of you to consider adding to it, so we could start it with even more. And I don’t really know what will happen from here. Alone, honestly, \$5,000 doesn’t go far. Together, it might become something we cannot yet see.

Two weeks ago, I spent some time with other area pastors at Wingspread. We’ve been convened by the Johnson Foundation to think about ways we can support and work with one another. We had several guest speakers, but one in particular stood out to me. Her name was Anna and she lives in Minneapolis. When ICE showed up in Minneapolis, Anna knew she wanted to help her immigrant neighbors and she started a group called Neighbors Helping Neighbors to help pay for rents and groceries for those who couldn’t leave their homes. The first week they had 20 people contact that they needed help. Then it was 40, then it was 100 a day. But just as quickly as that grew, they started having volunteers and money coming in at rates she’d never imagined. At this point they raised around \$750,000 and hundreds, maybe thousands, of people who are helping. Just an unbelievable abundance.

I also read recently about a church in North Carolina whose mission statement was “has everyone been fed?” After the terrible storms in fall 2024, a few of their church members managed to get to the building and just started making up the food that would go bad from the freezer with no power and serving it to those who showed up. That grew quickly into feeding over a 1000 people a day and when donated supplies were finally able to get through, their church filled to capacity with donations – an unbelievable abundance. This is what happens when people stay together in community.

Which made me think of today’s scripture. We’ve all heard this story. It is one of the very few stories in all four gospels and it comes up every year in the lectionary. You’ve likely heard at least two interpretations. I know I’ve preached both. One interpretation is perhaps that what happened that day was that all the people who were there took

out whatever they had and shared it, so that a little became a lot. Or another: perhaps what happened that day was Jesus performed a transcendent miracle for the crowd. Either way it was an example of unbelievable abundance. But I noticed something else for the first time this week.

When I read the story this time, I paid less attention to how everyone was fed and instead on what happened right before everyone was fed. Right before, the disciples, overwhelmed with the numbers and the amount of food that would be needed, wanted to disperse. They wanted everyone to go and find their own food. But Jesus tells them no. He says, “you feed them.” Which seems impossible. But what it meant was that instead of all going off on their own, they all stayed together. And either way you interpret the story, that’s what let the miracle happen - they stayed together. So, perhaps that is the key to making the impossible possible – we stay together.

The last 100 years or so of Christianity have often focused on faith as something private and personal. But in the Gospels, faith is almost always lived in groups — around tables, on hillsides, in crowds. While Jesus certainly had personal relationships, what Jesus had a lot more of was community. He had disciples and crowds. Jesus called people into community and asked, expected, them to get to know each other. And then, when they were together, impossible things became possible. When they were together with Jesus, people were healed, fed, brought in from the margins. When they were together with Jesus, unbelievable abundance kept showing up over and over again.

One of the takeaways in that clergy group after hearing from Anna from Minneapolis, was that it was great that so many people had come forward in the crisis, but really, that kind of mutual aid is what we should be about all the time. We know right now that we have neighbors who are hungry, who are struggling, who are losing their homes, who are in need. Why does it take a crisis for us to help each other? Or why don’t we see the crises that are already happening?

So, this rental assistance fund is one way Covenant is saying we see that there are people right here in our community who need help and it may seem entirely impossible that we would be able to fix the housing crisis, even just here in our community. But, also, maybe if we stay together, we’ll end up with more than we ever expected – an unbelievable abundance. Or maybe we won’t – for this initiative anyway. Maybe this fund will stay relatively small and help just a few people and actually I’m pretty sure that to the people who get to stay in their homes it will feel like unbelievable abundance to them.

Ultimately, this rental assistance fund isn’t now and won’t ever be the only way that we find ourselves led to reach out and care for our community. I can already tell that when we put our cake pans of joy on the communion table for Easter that it is going to look like an impressive abundance that will give a lot of families the chance to celebrate. And

there's a group of Covenant folks talking about how we can get involved with helping to feed kids in our neighborhood this summer. And the mission committee will be giving over \$30,000 away sometime in the next couple of months to agencies in Racine who take a little and turn it into an unbelievable abundance. And those are just a few of the places I know we'll be witnesses of God's unbelievable abundance together - because our plan is to stay together.

The promise of the Feeding of the 5,000 isn't that we'll always see the math work out. It's that when we commit to staying together, when we place what little we have into Jesus' hands, abundance appears. Maybe not everywhere. Maybe not all at once. But enough. And enough, shared together, is how the impossible becomes possible.