

August 6, 2023 10th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 55:1-5, Psalm 148:8-9, 14-21
Matthew 14:13-21

[The story Nick Tangen told us MAY have been from Michael Mather's book: Having Nothing, Possessing Everything.]

Juntos Podemos

Grace and peace, power and abundance, to you, beloved people of God. Amen.

Juntos Podemos. Together We Can.

I don't always title my sermons ahead of time.

More often the title emerges as I write.

I'm thankful that we're not a church that changes the church sign on Monday morning
to add the title for the upcoming Sunday...

because rarely on a Monday do I have next Sunday's title!

This week, though, I did.

In fact I've had this title for a couple weeks.

This title emerged on the 2nd full day in Guatemala.

Juntos Podemos is a Spanish phrase.

It means in English: Together We Can.

Say it with me. Juntos Podemos.

At La Mision San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala, Juntos Podemos is painted on walls.

It's printed on t-shirts.

It's woven into this mission's 50-some year history, and,

most truly, it's at the core of the theology, spiritual life and lived experience of that community.

Juntos Podemos, together we can.

This mission began in the early 1960s when a young priest from Minnesota

was invited to come to San Lucas Toliman,

an area of Guatemala where the Maya people had lived for generations.

Over its history, the land that we call Guatemala was colonized by Spain,

trampled by Mexican troops,

oppressed by the United States as our government sought to protect the US corporate interests,
and stirred violence.

In the mid 1960s era of the 2nd Vatican Council,

when the Catholic Church was opening up and liberation theology was taking form,

Father Greg Schaffer was meeting the Maya communities around Lake Atitlan. This ministry was and is about empowering the people through education, health, and redistributing land to the people from the plantations: big and bold steps, inspired and supported by the church, taken by the people. Together we can... lift one another's poverty, increase literacy, make a healthier community. Juntos Podemos.

Our Gospel reading this morning is from Matthew's 14th chapter, the feeding of the multitude.

Besides the resurrection, this is the only miracle shared by all four gospels.

In Matthew, the context is important:

The reading began: Now when Jesus heard this...

The "this" he heard is that John the Baptist has been beheaded.

Remember John?

Eager for support, Jesus' mother Mary seeks out John's mom Elizabeth during pregnancy.

It's after that visit that Mary sings her Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord... the Lord who scatters the proud...
who lifts up the lowly... who fills the hungry.

It's John who grew up to preach repentance in the wilderness, shaking the powers of the time.

And it's John who baptizes an adult Jesus in the waters of the Jordan,
who is privy to the voice of God naming Jesus beloved.

It's John who presses on the leaders, and calls a thing a thing when Herod's adultery is too much.
And it's John who is beheaded by these same powers.

That's where today's story picks up,
with Jesus, surly filled with memories and no stranger to the powers,
who goes to a deserted place by himself, I'd imagine, to grieve and to pray.
And it's in that deserted place that the people—clambering for healing—find Jesus.

When the evening is coming, the disciples want to send the people away,

but Jesus takes the five loaves and the two fish, blesses and breaks them.

This miracle is one of my favorites, it makes me curious:

Is the miracle that the loaves and fish stretch to feed that crowd of 5000 men

and surely thousands more women and children,

with 12 baskets of extras to spare?

Or is the miracle that in that moment,

when leaders were playing politics and beheading preachers,

when Jesus was grieving,

when the desire for healing was so very desperate,

that Jesus created a community and preached a message

where people would reach into their cloaks and

pull forth the heel of bread they'd brought along,

or the bit of fruit, or the piece of dried fish,

and with Jesus' blessing, they'd share it, making sure everyone had enough,

so much that there were 12 baskets remaining?

Could that be the miracle of the day? Or a miracle of the day?

Could Jesus' power be as much that he did miracles solo,

as that he empowered miracles in that multitude of hungry souls who gathered?

Could it be?

In Guatemala, we spent a couple of days with a local mission staff member named Karla.

Her role was to interpret between Spanish or the Mayan Kaqchikel (catch I kel), and English.

She did this with a big spirit, a jovial laugh, and an easy smile.

As we walked one afternoon,

she told us about a woman who'd received a new house through the construction program.

When the house was ready, everyone gathered to celebrate.

But the woman began to cry.

What's wrong? Karla asked her. "Why are you crying?"

The woman said, simply, "But my neighbor doesn't have a house."

This woman knew that she wasn't whole unless her neighbor also was whole.

That yearning, that desire: Juntos Podemos, together we can.

On Monday evening the Donation Listening Team sat in a circle on the patio with Nick Tangen.

Some of you recall that Nick was part of our staff at Hope for some years,

focused on community engagement and faith formation.

Now Nick works in the synod

equipping congregations for and neighboring practices and community engagement.

The Donation Listening Team asked Nick to reflect on

how we might think about this generous donation we've received,
and how it could be used for the sake of our neighborhood, our community.

Nick told a story that comes from Pastor Michael Mather

and the community of Broadway United Methodist Church,
an urban Indianapolis congregation, nestled in a community of economic struggle.

Where many see poverty, Pastor Michael invites people to think about their assets, their strengths.
In meeting a neighbor, he'll ask them about their gifts, their passion, their experience.

What do you know well enough you could teach someone else?

Asking that question one day, an older woman thought for a moment, and said, "I can cook."
So Pastor Michael and some of the church staff asked the woman to come and cook a meal.

She did, and it was great. They paid her for her cooking.

Then a few weeks later,

a neighborhood group wanted to use the church for a meeting that would include a meal.

Sure, you can meet here, but you need to use our caterer.

And so the group agreed, and met and this woman provided the meal.

It was wonderful, she was paid for her work.

A few weeks after, another group, another meal, the woman was paid for her work.

This time, someone had made business cards.

As the meal ended the woman passed them out, sharing the assets, her gifts.

Two years later her catering business was going .

Nick's point, like Pastor Michael's, is a vital and subtle shift:

Instead of asking: What can we do for you?

Rather, we'll accompany you, We'll ask: What are you good at?

Lean into the gifts, draw on the strengths, rather than the needs, and services.

What will the Donation Listening Team recommend? I don't know. They don't know.

What I do know is that the Holy Spirit is at work, Juntos Podemos.

That evening, we wrapped up that meeting with Nick on the patio,

just in time to join the Courtyard Concert.

The courtyard was full. Many of you were there, and lots of others, too,

enjoying Orkestar Bez Ime with their lively Eastern European Music
from Bulgaria and Ukraine, from the Roma people.

The treat I didn't expect that night, was dancing!

The musicians would get going on a tune.

Those who knew these traditional dances would, snake through the chairs, clapping and stepping.

It was a magical:

savoring a beautiful summer evening,
making a space to celebrate the traditions,
people willing to step out and share their gifts.
Juntos Podemos, my friends.

Together we can. I love today's gospel for it leaves me wondering about Jesus' power,
about his miracles,
about his way of inviting, and then empowering community to live beyond itself.

So here's my invitation to you for this week: Watch for the miracles.

Watch for what Jesus is doing.

And watch for what Jesus may be doing through others:

through the community, through our congregation, through the people you meet.

And watch for the miracles Jesus might be doing through you.

Juntos Podemos, dear ones, Together with God's help, we can.

Amen.