

“We Have Nothing Here”
Matthew 14:13-21
10th Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2026
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I’d like to invite you to spend a few minutes this morning thinking about nothing...

That’s right.
Thinking about nothing.
Now I don’t mean that I want your mind to go blank.

I do mean...consider that word.
The word...nothing.

What’s your relationship like with the word “nothing”?

Maybe you didn’t even know you had a relationship with nothing.
But all of us do.
We all encounter that word, in one way or another, at different times in our lives.

I recall being a senior in high school.

As I’ve mentioned before, I ran cross-country, and our team was never the best, but we had a chance my senior year to beat the team just down the road from us.

Waverly High School was always good in cross-country.
And they always creamed us in cross country.
But my senior year, we knew we had the runners to beat them.

So we were ready.

We went on the school announcements—no one ever announced cross-country meets on the school announcements—but we went on the announcements, and we said, “Come watch us beat Waverly!”

We invited the former cross-country coach, who had recently retired: “C’mon to the race, coach. You’ll enjoy it. We’re gonna beat Waverly.”

It was on our home course.
And the day came, the hour arrived.
The race began.
And I ran my worst race of the year.

At one point in the race, one of my teammates ran by me with one of the Waverly runners, and this teammate—who ended up beating that runner—this teammate was someone I always beat in a race!

If I had just gone with him, finished with my teammate, we would BOTH have beaten that Waverly runner, and—of course, I did the math after the race—what would have happened if I had run with my teammate?

We would have won the race on a tiebreaker!
That was nearly 40 years ago.

Do you get the feeling, from the emotion in my voice, that at age 54 I would STILL like a do-over of that race from my senior year?

Because when it was over, and I got back home, all I could think about was how I wanted another chance. But it was my senior year.

There were no more chances.
There was nothing—absolutely nothing—I could do.

Have you ever been there before?
I don’t mean failing in an athletic event.

I mean...in life.

When there was nothing you could do.

Nothing you could do...

to help a loved one, or mend a relationship,
or undo something that you did...that you wished
you had not done?

Nothing...can be a very disheartening word.

A discouraging word.

I would understand if you didn't want to consider that word this morning...but before you give up on it, let's another look at our text.

You know the story.

Jesus is with his disciples.

They've gone to a deserted place.

He's trying to escape the crowds, but they keep following him.

And Jesus has compassion on them, cures the sick among them...

But then the hour is late.

The disciples are worried—how are we going to feed all these strangers?

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

We have nothing here...

What's your relationship like...with the word “nothing”?

Let me get at it like this.

A friend of mine recently went to see the play *Death of a Salesman* in New York City, with Nathan Lane playing Willy Loman. He said it was excellent, and he reminded me of what happened when the play premiered in Philadelphia in 1949.

At the end, the fall of the final curtain was met with a long, tense silence ...at first, there was no noise, no sound.

Nothing.

And then....thunderous applause.

And then something happened that surprised even the author of the play, Arthur Miller.

Instead of leaving, audience members just stood there, many of them openly weeping, and they “started talking to complete strangers about how deeply affected they had been by the play.”¹

How did Arthur Miller do it?

I’m no drama critic, but I think part of the play’s deep resonance, then as now...has something to do with the word “nothing.”

Toward the end of the play, Willy is arguing with his son, Biff. Neither father nor son has had a life that turned out the way they wanted it to turn out.

Biff says to his father:

“Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you!”

To which Willy replies:

“I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!”

¹ Elizabeth Lynn & Mark Ramsey, “No One is a Dime a Dozen,” The Ministry Collaborative, June 25, 2026.

“Pop,” Biff replies, “I’m nothing! I’m nothing, Pop.
Can’t you understand that?”²

And with that exchange in a broken relationship between father and son, Arthur Miller had tapped into a deep-seated fear:

A fear of amounting to nothing...
A fear of being able to do nothing
to fix a relationship...
A fear of your own life being just...frittered way.

Which is, perhaps, why all four Gospel writers considered the story that we heard today from Matthew to be one of the most important stories they had to tell.

Did you know that today’s text—along with the Easter story—is the ONLY other miracle story that appears in all four Gospels?

It’s a story about what God does with NOTHING.

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”
To which Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.”

Then Jesus gives thanks, blesses the loaves, breaks the loaves, distributes the five loaves to his disciples—and by God’s grace, those five loaves and two fish fed “about five thousand men, besides women and children.”

It’s a story about what God does with nothing.

² Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, New York: Penguin Books, 1949.

Have you ever considered what God does with nothing?
It's all over scripture.

Maybe you recall what Paul says in our first text for today?

In Romans, chapter 5, Paul writes that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

According to Paul, God can start with NOTHING, and bring about new life!

Or perhaps you recall Luke's Gospel, when the angel visits Mary in chapter 1, and the angel tells Mary that she will have a son, and he will be called “Son of the Most High,” and “of his kingdom there will be no end,”....

Mary responds, “How can this be?”

And what does the angel say?

Does the angel say, eh, you're right, that's too difficult for God...?
No.

The angel says:

“...nothing will be impossible with God.”

What's your relationship like with the word “nothing”?

I ask because it's very easy, in our day and time, to get overwhelmed by the world's problems.

War with Iran.

Genocide in Sudan.

An Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Impending famine in Gaza.

What are we supposed to do?

It's easy to come to the same conclusion as the disciples.

It's easy to say, "We have nothing here."

It's easy to say, "There's nothing I can do."

But the next time you feel that way, I hope you will remember our text. I hope you will remember that God's favorite time to act is not when we come to God with the answer already solved, and the plan already prepared.

God's favorite time to act through us...is, I believe, when we are at our wits' end.

When we feel like we have...nothing.

Chris Hoke is a Presbyterian pastor and the creator of the One Parish One Prisoner program in the state of Washington. It's a ministry designed to help church members not only get to know people who are currently in prison, but also to continue that relationship with them when that imprisoned child of God gets released from prison.

It all started because Hoke had been leading a Bible study at a nearby prison, and one of the people he met was Jose. Jose had spent his life immersed in [gangs, and when Hoke visited him] Jose spoke about how much support he'd need if he wanted to stay away from the gangs, and to build a new life upon his release.

So, if Jose was making such a commitment to change his life and trust new people like me, Hoke writes, Jose challenged me to make a solid commitment to be there for him upon his release in two years.

This, Hoke says, gave him pause.
What would that kind of commitment mean?

After prayer and reflection, Hoke and his fiancé decided to offer Jose a room in their home, and he shared the letters that he was receiving from Jose with the wider presbytery.

A flood of affection and support poured into Jose's prison cell throughout his final year that Jose was in solitary confinement. His first day out of prison, Jose opened greeting cards filled with prayers and gift cards...

And Chris Hoke knew he was onto something.

So he created a ministry in which other churches could do the same kind of thing. Initially, there were three churches that decided to give this a shot.

Each...built loving relationships with an incarcerated child of God who otherwise would have been invisible to them. And the church teams were filled with hope when their new friend was released.

No more visiting hours.
They could get together with their new friend, whenever they pleased.

But things didn't always go the way those churches hoped.

For example, Leno came home to a lavish welcome, living in a church member's guest cottage...[but Leno was soon overcome with overwhelming anxiety], relapsed into addiction, and disappeared.

His church team was crushed.

Session meetings that were normally concerned with church operations and budgets were now filled with questions about mental health and addiction needs in their community.

Leno's struggles had opened the church's eyes to a part of their community that they had never looked at before.

One woman on the team that welcomed Leno told of how, for months, as she drove around town, she looked down every alley in constant search for him...

Heartbroken at Leno's [relapse], Hoke writes,
 the congregation's heart—
 without even knowing it was happening—
 began to resemble "the shape of God's heart,"
 looking down every alley to find
 a lost child of God.³

Now we don't have a One Parish One Prisoner program here.
 But we do have other opportunities to love our neighbors.
 To see parts of our community that might be easy to overlook.

Take a good look at the announcements in your Harbinger today.
 They aren't just boxes to make our church look busy.
 They are invitations to take a chance with your faith.

You can tutor children at Pleasant Valley after school this fall.
 You can volunteer for It's Elementary on Wednesday afternoons.

³ Chris Hoke, "One parish one prisoner: Every church a local resurrection community," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 21, 2022.

You can make a gift to our Congregational Care Fund today—it's a fund which helps members of our Westminster family make it through a financially challenging time in their lives.

You can sign up for our Day of Service on Saturday, August 29.

You can put food in our Little Free Pantry—you know what I'm referring to?

The beautifully designed outdoor cupboard that sits adjacent to the parking lot that leads to the gym...it's right there on Augusta Street, and our WPCYG ministry put it there for those who suffer from food insecurity...you could make it a habit to put non-perishable food in that cupboard every time you go to Harris Teeter.

In other words, try something new with your faith this fall.

In a speech that he gave in 1960 at Spelman College, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“I have faith in the future because I have faith in God and I believe that there is a power, a creative force in this universe seeking at all times to bring down prodigious hilltops of evil and pull low gigantic mountains of injustice...

“The basic thing” King went on to say, “is to keep moving.”

“If you can't fly, run;
if you can't run, walk;
if you can't walk, crawl;
but by all means keep moving.”⁴

⁴ A transcript of King's speech can be found at ["Keep Moving from This Mountain," Address at Spelman College on 10 April 1960 | The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.](https://www.martinlutherking.org/keep-moving-from-this-mountain/)

It strikes me, that's what the disciples were tempted NOT to do all those years ago.

They wanted to stop moving.
They wanted to be alone with Jesus.
Send the crowd away, Jesus.
We have nothing here.

The next time you're tempted to say that...

"Jesus, I have no time on my schedule,
nothing left in the tank..."

I want you to remember this text.

And keep moving.
Move toward the neighbors in need near you.

Because God would love nothing more
than to take your nothing, and turn it into a miracle...

Amen.