

“*YOU* give them something to eat.”

The Feeding of the 5000

Matthew 14:13-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today's sermon text is the miracle story known as "The Feeding of the Five Thousand" – and many of you have probably heard it about 5000 times. This is one of those stories that even people who are not active in any church are somewhat familiar with.

We know how important it was to the early church because it is the *only* miracle story that appears in all four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each gospel writer tells the story a bit differently, adding or subtracting details to fit his own particular theological perspective and purpose.

I'd like to state right from the start that in my opinion the most important question to ask of this story (or any miracle story) is not whether it is historically true or not. Questioning whether this miracle literally happened the way it is recorded in scripture is an argument that has been around for centuries, and one that will never be satisfactorily answered.

Speaking personally, I would answer the question about biblical miracles much as Marcus Borg or Bishop John Shelby Spong would: **Yes, the story bears witness to the truth; but no, it did not necessarily happen in any literal way.**

This is where many people get bogged down. Ever since the Enlightenment, we in the western world have been taught to believe that truth and historical accuracy are inextricably linked. In other words, most people would label something as 'true' only if it could be considered to have actually happened in a literal way. But we are increasingly being taught to add another question: **What is truth?**

Modern biblical interpretation methods have helped those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum to **focus more on the truths that are revealed in a biblical story, than on needing it to have happened in any sort of literal way in order to make it meaningful.**

This makes the language used in scriptures, in many instances at least, much more metaphorical than literal. Therefore a story can be "true" in either case.

That being said, I think the best approach to this text, and to all of scripture for that matter, is to ask of the text:

1. What does the story reveal about the nature and character of God;
2. What does it reveal about ourselves;

3. What does it reveal about our relationship with God;
4. What does it reveal about our relationship with each other?

Included in those questions are discovering what are the implications to us as disciples, individually and as the church?

So, what does this story of the Feeding of the 5000 tell us about God? We learn, through the actions of Jesus who had compassion for those in the crowd, that **God is compassionate and concerned for our well-being**. That's a very different picture when compared to others who paint God as an old gray-bearded man sitting far away on a throne acting as a stern judge and just waiting to zap us when we step out of line.

It is important to note that Jesus had more than just a simple *feeling* of compassion for the crowd. While feelings are important, and very motivational, Jesus went one step further. **He put his compassion into action by actually ministering to the needs of the crowd**. This feeding story reveals that **God is concerned not only for our spiritual well-being, but also for our physical well-being**.

The next question is: What does this story have to say about us as followers of Christ? Well, it has many things to say. For one, just as Jesus' compassion was the motivation for his ministry, so it was for his disciples, and so it is for us. In fact, it's the third bullet point of College Hill's Vision Statement: **"Reaching out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice."**

Following Jesus' lead, the disciples become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of available food for the large crowd of people. We learn what many of us already know and experience, that **compassion for others can be, and most often is, contagious!**

The disciples' *solution* to the problem, however, is different than Jesus'. The disciples think it best to send the crowd away, so that everyone can go to nearby towns and eat, thereby taking care of their own needs. To their surprise Jesus tells them, "*you give them something to eat*" (v.16). I'll return to this statement in a moment, because I believe it is at the very heart of the story – hence this sermon's title.

The disciples predictably respond with, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." With limited resources in the midst of a crisis, the disciples would rather send the needy crowd away to seek help on their own.

So here's something important for us to reflect upon: **Is it possible that the disciples represent our own desire, from time to time, to "send away" others so that they can find help on their own?** We, like the disciples, are often tempted to believe that our resources (individually, or as a congregation) don't amount to much of anything either – so why bother, especially with so many needy people all around us.

I must admit that I have always struggled to some extent with what to do for folks who knock on the church door for help. Within the past decade the number of scam artists, telling blatant lies in order to get a handout, has

dramatically increased. It has caused many pastors and churches to take a very guarded stance, and has resulted in a reluctance to help anyone, for fear of being taken advantage of.

Yet when I meet someone at the door, or on the street, I also hear in my head Jesus' emphatic statement from this miracle story, "YOU give them something..." And I am reminded that for Jesus compassion is accompanied with action, not just kind words and the offering of a prayer.

My own personal response, I must confess however, is increasingly more like that of the disciples. I acknowledge that person's need, spend some quality time with them, but then often send them away, **citing my own and the church's limited resources. I find that increasingly unsatisfactory and problematic – not only as a pastor, but also as a Christian.** Biblical commentator and Presbyterian preacher, Thomas Long, rightly reflects, however:

Indeed, the church is always in the desert, the place where it cannot rely upon its own resources, which are few. The church is hungry itself and is surrounded by a world of deep cravings, people who are lonely, disoriented, and poor in many different ways.

Against the savage realities of human need, the church sees only small numbers on the membership roles and even smaller ones in the mission budget. It is no wonder, then, that the church joins the disciples in crying, 'This is a desert. Send the crowds away to fend for themselves.'

This is a dilemma and a challenge that we must continue to face and address. "You give them something to eat" continues to challenge Christians today. We live in a world, and even a neighborhood, full of hungry people (mentally, emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically) and we pray that Jesus might do something.

When Jesus responds to the disciples, "You give them something to eat," the disciples respond back, "We have nothing here – nothing – nothing but five loaves and two fish." They emphasize not what they have, but what they don't have. They see not possibilities, but problems.

But have you ever thought about how much money and work it would take to find and distribute food to 5000 hungry people? And that, according to our biblical text in Matthew, is just the number of men. Add the women and children and there may be as many as 18-20,000. That's like trying to feed the size of a crowd in the new BOK Center downtown. Then can you imagine the clean up afterwards!

From a practical standpoint, this biblical story encourages Christians and congregations to get beyond the attitude that says, "We have nothing, except for this very little." For this story reveals that God uses even the very little we have to offer to minister in powerful ways to others.

Over the years I have learned from folks involved in ministries of peace and justice to **focus more on what's called a theology of abundance, than on a theology of scarcity**. When we focus on scarcity, our anxiety level rises – like when we reflect upon how much less money we have at the end of each month after paying our ever-increasing bills.

When we focus on scarcity, our anxiety level rises when we think about things like raising enough funds to finalize our capital campaign in order to finish the elevator and parking lot project.

When we focus on scarcity, our (or at least my) anxiety level rises when we think about the funds we need to have a full and functioning professional staff here at the church.

Here's where our scripture lesson can offer us some guidance. In today's biblical text the disciples express their anxiety and concern for the needs of the crowd. They bring those needs and concerns to Jesus. **We, too, need to be concerned for others and ourselves, and bring those things to God in prayer.**

Yet like Jesus' response to the disciples, sometimes God answers our prayers with: You do something about it. Perhaps God is saying to us: I've provided you with food, distribute some of it to others. I've provided you with money, donate some to those in need. I've provided you with time and abilities, volunteer them to the good of the church and the community.

God will use and bless what we bring, even if it's only five loaves and two fish. That's because God is in the abundance business, not scarcity. So let us emphasize what we *have*, not what we *don't* have – the possibilities and opportunities, not just the problems and seemingly overwhelming challenges.

And like the disciples who were motivated by compassion, **let us encourage and feed each other.**

Amen.