

What Do You Do With 5000 Hungry People? *The Feeding of the 5000*

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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I can't quite recall the particulars, but at some point in my faith development I got the notion (and not from my parents or any pastor of a church that I attended) that in order to be a good and faithful Christian, I needed to take the stories in the Bible literally – as historically documented eyewitness accounts. Anything less, I thought, would be a reflection of a weak faith. I used to be a proponent of that dogmatic bumper sticker theology, "God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It."

This approach to Christianity wasn't effectively challenged in my life until I entered seminary at the age of 33. The primary challenge itself came in the form of **how to define the word and notion of "truth."**

For most of us in Western Civilization, we have been raised in a period of human history that has **equated truth with verifiable facts**. Most of us were taught that truth was absolute, not relative. To claim that something was "true" meant that it actually happened. As a person with a scientific background this made particular sense to me.

The absolutism of that notion, however (and thank goodness), is finally starting to go by the wayside as we enter further into the 21st century. There have been many factors leading to this, including the publication of an ever-increasing number of books and educational materials from progressive biblical scholars and theologians. These are being read and studied not only in seminaries, but also now in living rooms; not only by pastors, but also now by people in the pews.

This is making an ever-increasing impact on the variety of ways to understand the meaning of the word and notion of "truth." Take, for instance, the remarkable book entitled, *Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously, But Not Literally*, by Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg.

In the very influential church school curriculum called *Living the Questions: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity*, which we studied here a couple of years ago, Marcus Borg is interviewed by a conservative evangelical radio talk show host questioning his post-modern approach to biblical interpretation. Borg responds by talking about those people in our day and age that simply cannot take the Bible literally, as a document filled with verifiable historical facts. He turns the question around and asks the interviewer if there is not a place for these folks within Christianity.

Borg challenges the assumption that a literal interpretation of the Bible is a requirement that God places on people in order for them to be considered a Christian. His implication is that biblical literalism as a requirement (and a fairly modern one at

that in the scheme of human history), has simply been imposed by a growing percentage of conservative evangelical Christians.

Borg's point, however, and the point of all progressive Christianity, is that **something can be "true" without having to be a literal historical fact.** Yet, that is a leap in understanding that many have not been able to take. An increasing number of biblical scholars, however, believe that **the gospels were actually written primarily with metaphorical language from the very beginning, and were never meant to be taken literally.**

This statement, while most likely not particularly shocking to those of us here at College Hill, is still considered heresy by what may be the majority of Christians here in the "Buckle of the Bible Belt." That's one reason why several leaders from a variety of progressive congregations here in Tulsa have formed the relatively new organization, the **Progressive Religious Coalition of Tulsa**, of which I have been a part. Our hope is to **provide educational opportunities for those whom literalism is not only impossible, but often even seen as a dangerous approach to biblical interpretation.** We've only had one public event so far, which was a few months ago during the season of Lent, when we dealt with the issue of the interpretation of Jesus' death, and alternatives to the traditional doctrine of the Atonement. Our next scheduled event will be on Sunday, October 16 here at College Hill. Our theme is entitled, **"Is the Bible 'True' – A Progressive Approach,"** and we will address this topic directly.

So what does any or all of this have to do with today's Gospel reading from Matthew 14 – the miracle story commonly known as *The Feeding of the 5000*? Well, just about everything. Because **for those of us who do not necessarily take the miracle stories in the Bible literally, it's crucial to not merely toss them out.** For as even the most liberal of biblical interpreters out there would profess, just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it doesn't contain a word of truth. In other words, **the story points beyond itself to reveal a deeper meaning and reality.**

This is the approach to biblical interpretation that I share with my many Presbyterian pastor colleagues here in Tulsa when we meet each Wednesday morning for our Lectionary Bible Study Group. Our discussion of this particular story of the feeding of the 5000 a week and a half ago was very productive. Instead of getting bogged down in a heated debate over whether this miracle story was a literal historical event or not, we concentrated instead on the many themes presented in the text that could provide a path for a variety of different ways to preach on this passage.

So instead of focusing on just one theme or aspect of this story, which is my preferred method of preaching, I want to do something a bit different this morning and share with you a range of approaches (among many others that we simply don't have time this morning to address) that one might take when studying and reflecting upon this text.

The first theme is a focus on the issue of **compassion.** Through the words and actions of Jesus in this story, the gospel writer hopes to impart an understanding of God that reveals **God as compassionate and concerned for our well-being – and not only our spiritual well-being, but also for our physical well-being.** That, in and of itself, is a very different picture from a God who sits far off on a throne acting like a stern judge who's just waiting to zap those who step out of line.

It is important to note, however, that **Jesus had more than just a feeling of compassion for those in need. He took the next step and put his compassion into action by actually ministering to their needs.** That Jesus was moved to action by his

compassion for the crowd is accentuated because we're told that he had originally departed in a boat by himself in order to spend some time alone after he learned the horrifying news of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist.

How often do our plans take an unexpected turn when faced with the needs of others? The question becomes: How do we respond? This leads to another approach to this text. Just what would you have done if you were one of the disciples faced with 5000 hungry people, and that by the way doesn't include the women and children?

Instead of approaching this as a ministry opportunity, their solution was to simply send the crowd away so that they could feed themselves. **When you and I find ourselves face to face with someone in need, isn't it often easier, and perhaps even our first gut reaction, to simply send him or her away – perhaps with a kind word, but not with the compassion that would lead us to take the action necessary to actually help alleviate their need?**

That's why Jesus' response is so profound. He says, "They do not need to go away; YOU give them something to eat." But even then, the disciples' response was one of resignation, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

How often are we tempted (either as individuals or as a congregation) to believe that our own resources are too meager and limited to do anyone any much good? And heaven forbid, what if their cry for help is actually a scam? Sometimes it is. Here at College Hill, located in the economically depressed neighborhood of Kendall Whittier, I continue to struggle with what to do for those who knock on our church door throughout the week – week after week. I must admit that I hear in my head Jesus' emphatic statement, "YOU give them something..." And I am reminded that for Jesus, compassion is always accompanied with action.

While I try to err on the side of compassion, on occasion my own response is often like that of the disciples: **acknowledge the need, but then send them away to fend for themselves. I find that increasingly unsatisfactory and problematic – not only as a pastor, but also as a Christian.** As biblical commentator Tom 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 rolls 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 we must face. And it is at this point in the story that we learn more about God and our relationship to God and each other. Perhaps the lesson for the disciples to learn, and therefore for the church, is that **God is not only compassionate but also abundantly able to provide. For us, that means a change in focus from what can be termed a 'theology of scarcity' to a 'theology of abundance.'** And I'm NOT talking about what's called "Prosperity Theology," with its misguided notion that if you're a good and faithful Christian then God will bless you with wealth and good fortune all the days of your life. That, to put it most simply, is unbiblical.

Rather, **a theology of abundance reflects an understanding that instead of focusing on what we *don't* have, it focuses on what we *do* have – not on our weaknesses, but on our strengths, which are many. That may indeed be enough to help others who are in emotional, spiritual, and even physical need.**

A theology of abundance – accentuated in the biblical story with the observation that even after everyone ate their fill, there were still leftovers – recognizes that with our limited resources, **God can use even the little we have to offer to minister in powerful ways to others.** And even then, perhaps the word to each of us as individuals, and to us as a congregation, is, “You give them something...”

So just what will we do when faced with thousands of hungry people?

Amen.