

Matthew 14:13-21

## MORE THAN ENOUGH

A minister was going into a hospital, and there was a mother and her little girl walking just in front of him. Before they got to the entrance, the little girl stopped and asked, “How are we going to get inside? There are no handles on those doors.” But the mother just smiled and walked forward; the electronic eye opened the door automatically and they walked in to the hospital.

The minister, Dr. Edward Bowen, reflecting on that experience, said: I wonder if we don’t spend too much of our time just standing in front of those closed doors. We stand there, thinking how impossible it is for us to get through. But Jesus’ advice to us is, “Don’t stand there and think about it. Just go forward, and trust God to open the doors and do what is needed.” Isn’t that what happened with the disciples? They thought that feeding that crowd was impossible. But as they obeyed Jesus and went out, they discovered that God did what was needed. (Lectionary Homiletics, Aug. ’99, pg. 7)

We will return to those thoughts before long, but that story prompts me to ask these questions, “How do we get inside this story of Jesus feeding the five thousand? How can we get a handle on what took place that day as dusk drew nearer and hunger pains grew stronger? How did Jesus feed all of those people with only five loaves and two fish? What is this biblical story trying to tell us about Jesus?”

It might interest you to know that this particular story about Jesus feeding the multitude is the only miracle of Jesus that is found in all four of the New Testament gospels. In addition, the gospels of Matthew and Mark include a similar story of Jesus feeding the four thousand. Quite obviously, something important is going on here!

Through the ages, most readers of the scriptures have taken it for granted that this is a miracle about how Jesus took a little food and made it a lot in order to feed five thousand people. By the way, Matthew tells us that number only accounts for the men; when you add in the women and children, the number may swell to 10,000 or more.

Some have conjectured that Jesus and the disciples had already prepared sufficient supplies ahead of time in order to feed such a large number of people. Others have suggested that, when Jesus had the disciples share the five loaves and two fish, many more in the crowd were inspired by this example and were motivated to share the small amount of food they had tucked away for themselves. Once everyone shared their modest portions, there was more than enough for all to be fed.

Also, in verse 19, we read that Jesus took the five loaves, blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples. These same four verbs – took, blessed, broke, and gave – are used in Matthew’s account of the Last Supper. This was not a coincidence as Matthew meant to link this miracle of abundance with the church’s Sacrament of Holy Communion. Thus, some would argue that each person received only a small fragment of bread and fish instead of heaping portions. Others see this story of the feeding of the five thousand as a prelude to the messianic banquet for all of Jesus’ faithful followers in the glorious future of the heavenly kingdom.

Finally, it’s possible to read this biblical story and remember how God fed Israel the manna as Moses led them through the wilderness (Exodus 16). Or, you could connect this story with Elisha feeding 100 men with twenty barley loaves and fresh ears of grain, in which there was also food left over (2 Kings 4:42-44). This may be Matthew’s way of depicting Jesus as the

Messiah of Israel, who does everything bigger and better than his predecessors, Moses and Elisha.

Most of these interpretations of Jesus feeding the 5,000+ people have a ring of truth to them, and I think it's interesting to ponder the various layers of meaning behind this story. We will never know – at least on this side of the grave – how Jesus fed the multitude. And yet, our need to know “how” is not nearly as important as the “why.”

Why did Jesus feed so many people? The obvious answer is that it was late, the people were hungry, and they were in a deserted place, which means there were no towns or 7-11 stores nearby in which to purchase food. But the real answer goes even deeper than that explanation.

Jesus had recently learned that King Herod had put John the Baptist to death. Upon hearing this devastating news, and perhaps realizing his own fate, Jesus withdrew in a boat to a lonely place to be alone with his thoughts. However, when the people learned that Jesus had come ashore, they came out from their respective towns along the seashore and followed him. Even though Jesus needed some time alone, when he saw the great crowd, what did he do? He had compassion for them and cured their sick. In other words, Jesus set aside his own needs and ministered to the multitude of people gathered around him.

It was this very same compassion that prompted Jesus to act on behalf of many by providing more than enough food for they had a physical need to eat and be nourished. In this story, we certainly can hear God's love for all people and God's strong desire to be present with and to graciously provide for those in need. At the very least, we should hear and understand this story to mean that Jesus shows forth God's providential and abundant care for others. In Christ, the weary find rest and hungry souls are fed.

It's tempting to read and understand this story as a story about Jesus, who is God's Son, who has both divine authority and compassion, who heals the sick and satisfies the physical needs and the spiritual needs of all who come to him. It's a comforting story about Jesus, and it's one we can relate to as we have experienced the many ways that God's extravagant love has touched our lives and made a significant difference. However, the story doesn't end there. It won't go away or be dismissed so easily. It's also a story about Jesus' disciples, which includes you and me!

We should note that the real miracle here - far beyond the loaves and the fish that Jesus gave to people that day – was the gift of himself; and, as the people received Jesus, they received life in all its fullness. Furthermore, as Jesus gave himself to others, he did so through the presence and work of his disciples. The disciples came to Jesus with the concern that the hour was late and the place was deserted; they felt that Jesus should disperse the crowd so that they could return to their villages and get something to eat. Jesus said, “They need not go away; you (“you!”) give them something to eat.” The disciples countered by saying all that they had were five loaves and two fish. Jesus replied, “Bring them here to me.” Then, after taking, blessing, and breaking the loaves, Jesus gave the food to his disciples, who, in turn, gave the food to the crowds. And, there was more than enough left over, twelve baskets full.

“You give them something to eat.” Things haven't changed much since Jesus first walked the earth and ministered to the people. Jesus is still in the business of employing his disciples to get the work done. He takes the little we give him and makes it stretch and grow; then, he sends us forth to serve God's people and make a difference for good in their lives. No matter how much we give and do, there is always more than enough to go around.

A minister told about a woman in his church who came to him and said, “Pastor, we have decided to adopt the foster child that we have been keeping. He is such a dear little thing. The

parents have given him up for adoption, and we think that we ought to do it.” The pastor asked her, “Do you really think that is wise? You already have three children. You are a great mother, but don’t you think there are limits to how much love you can give?” “When it comes to love,” she said, “I have not yet found the limits. From my experience, love is a renewable resource. The more love you give, the more love you seem to have. That’s how it’s been in my experience.”

Dr. Will Willimon tells about a church in the heart of one of our large cities. It had been a large, thriving downtown church, but over the past two decades it has shrunk to nearly nothing. A young woman went to be the pastor at the church, and, in a sermon one Sunday she noted how impressed she was by all of the children who walked past the church each afternoon and played in the church’s playground after school.

“Few of those children have parents at home in the afternoon. That means that most of them go home to an empty house or else hang out on the streets on their own, and you know what that can lead to,” she told the congregation. “I wonder if God is calling somebody here, this morning, to respond to this. I look out and I see experienced, wise people who, in their day, were masters at raising children. Is this your day to step up and raise someone else’s child?”

The next week six of her members, among them one of the oldest people in the congregation, volunteered to begin an after school ministry at the church. They were soon joined by a dozen others who provided recreation, homework tutoring, and refreshments for the children every afternoon from four until six.

Out of that ministry there has arisen a new church. That congregation is now thriving with an influx of families and people from the neighborhood. “You don’t have to be a great church to have a great ministry,” the pastor commented. “The American family is in such lousy shape, there are so many kids out there who are forced to fend for themselves, and all you need is a surplus of older people. God had already given us all we needed to have a future as a church.” (Pulpit Resource, July 31, 2011, pg. 23)

We may be tempted to think we don’t have much to give, but, when God gets hold of it, it is enough. In fact, it’s more than enough! This story about Jesus is a story that happens again and again in a million places, through millions of his disciples. Jesus quite often uses us – you and me – to be the means by which the abundant grace of God gets distributed to many others, who are in need. And, there is always more than enough grace to go around! Jesus says to us, come as you are, no matter how inadequate and unprepared and ill-equipped you may feel you may be. And working together, that which is little will always become much if it is done in the service of Christ. St. Teresa of Avila expressed it beautifully centuries ago:

Christ has  
No body on earth but yours;  
No hands but yours;  
No feet but yours;  
Yours are the eyes  
Through which is to look out  
Christ’s compassion to the world;  
Yours are the feet  
With which he is to go about  
Doing good;  
Yours are the hands  
With which he is to bless now.

May we be the hands and feet of Christ as he uses us to feed a world that hungers for the love of God. May God use us in miraculous ways to help bring the Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. And, may the offerings of our lives and our gifts, coupled with God's gracious abundance, be more than enough to bless and empower others. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens  
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA  
July 31, 2011