

“Feed How Many, Now?”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 14: 13-21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.



Sermon: *“Feed How Many, Now?”*

On its surface this is your basic miracle story. For generations, people have read this passage and been moved not just by Jesus’ concern for the crowd but by his miraculous ability to take a small amount of food and feed thousands of people with it. Who else could do that? Only Jesus. And as he had compassion for others and served them without reservation, so are we called to love and serve others without reservation, too. Those are two very important points, and if the power of Jesus and our call to love and serve as he did are what we take away from this story, then that’s a pretty good lesson right there. But I believe there’s something more here. Something deeper.

Whenever I read this story two questions always come to mind:

1. Why do the disciples want to send the crowd away?
2. If there is no place for the crowds to get food out there in the wilderness, where are the disciples going to find it?

Now the first question could have a couple of different answers. It could be a matter of simple compassion. If Jesus doesn’t release the crowd to leave now, they may not be able to find food, and they will be travelling home after dark which might be more dangerous. If it’s getting late and the people need to eat, the kindest thing to do is let them leave so they can go home.

But there could also be something less sympathetic motivating the disciples here. The disciples could want the crowds to go home because they believe feeding these people is not their responsibility. You and I, when we leave home for the day, we generally make provision for ourselves. If you live close enough, you might just come home at lunch time. But if not, then you either pack a lunch, or you bring cash or cards to buy lunch somewhere. Same thing here. When these folks leave home for the day, they would take some food and a skin of water with them or at least have a plan for where they could get these critical items.

It’s just common sense. And if they didn’t, then it would be reasonable to hold them accountable for that. This is the ethos of personal responsibility that plays so prominently in American lore and politics; the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality that says we should be able to care for ourselves and not rely on others for our daily needs. And that if we don’t have what we need, it’s our own fault for not saving, thinking ahead, or working hard enough. That may be a common American ethos, but it is not an entirely Christian one.

But here’s what’s so crazy about how Jesus handles this situation: he doesn’t seem to care about what the people have or don’t have; what they should have done or didn’t do, or why. He goes straight to the disciples’ responsibility for their fellow human beings. “You give them something to eat.”

And we can hear echoes of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan¹ where the Samaritan does not question why the traveler is wounded and what he might have done to get himself in that situation or what his responsibility for himself may be. Remember, the parable of the Samaritan takes place on the Jericho Road which is well-known as a haven for highway bandits. Travelling that stretch of road alone was a reckless act. And stopping to help would have put the Samaritan at risk, too. But the Samaritan, who represents what it means to love God and neighbor, does not care about the circumstances, the who, how, and why of the situation. He only cares about the need. In this grassy field, as the hour grows late and the sun begins its downward journey toward the western horizon, Jesus does not care about circumstances, he only cares about need.

Which brings us to our second question: Where are the disciples gonna' find what they need to feed all of these people? Matthew tells us there are 5000 *men* and then an indeterminate number of women and children with them. So, this wasn't just a feeding of 5,000. It was more like a feeding of 10, 15, or maybe 20,000! There are no grocery stores, and no farmer's markets where they are, and if there was someone willing to sell them food, there's little chance they could have provided enough for well over 5000 men, women, and children. In fact, the disciples implore Jesus to send the people into the nearby villages to find food because there is nothing where they are and all they have between them is five loaves of bread and two fish.

Which is simply not enough. It's not even close to *maybe* being enough. It's a preposterously small amount of food for such a large mass of people. It would be like inviting several thousand of your closest friends to a cookout in your backyard and then only having one package of hotdogs and a single dish of potato salad. The crowd is too big, the need too great, and the resources too few. This is undisputed. The disciples know what Jesus asks of them is impossible.

So, what happened? As Christians we understand that with Christ, all things are possible. Philippians 4:13 has long been one of my favorite passages: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." The miraculous power of Jesus takes what the disciples have and makes something amazing come from it. And that's true for us today, too. God can take our gifts and skills, no matter how small, and do something amazing with them.

But the lesser known miracle; the part of this story that gets so little attention is this: that the disciples tried; that they took those few loaves and fish and actually started trying to feed these thousands of people.

When Jesus took their food and then started handing it back to them, don't you think some of them felt foolish? Don't you think they doubted? What happens after the first few people get bread and it runs out? What do I tell the people further back in line? This isn't going to work. Anyone with a brain stem can see that this isn't going to work. The disciples in that moment face a choice, to attempt the irrational; the inconceivable, to follow Jesus, or not.

It is simply absurd, and yet the disciples choose to follow Jesus even though it makes no sense. This moment of decision is a leap of faith, and it is the pivotal moment of this story. And as they act in faith to do what Jesus calls them to do, the food keeps coming. The people keep getting fed. And while the miracle of Jesus turning a little into an abundance was impressive, so was the faith of the disciples to choose to take part in it.

I guess if Jesus could have done that, he could have just miracled the food into people's hands without the disciples. But like always, he calls upon them to be a part of what he is doing, and he allows them to choose whether they will or whether they won't. And it's the same for you and me today.

Which is important for us to hear and understand in these difficult times of pandemic and societal upheaval. This COVID-19 pandemic is real. And it's not just a disease, but a set of social issues involving schools, and our work, and our politics, and almost everything else. And racism is real, which may be news to some people, but it really shouldn't be. For generations, racism has bred unequal access to education, housing, jobs, health care, and opportunity. And our economic struggles are real as we try to balance providing for ourselves and our families with keeping one another safe from the spread of this disease.

Add to those issues the very real and persistent problems of access to health care, and hunger and poverty and opioid addiction and all of the things we were facing before, and it can all seem overwhelming. Fixing any of it much less all of it can seem like an insurmountable task. And yet Jesus calls us to act; to be salt and light in the world; to be a part of the Kingdom of grace and peace and justice that God is building

We look upon the problems of this world and we hear Jesus telling us "You give them something to eat." And we can see that the crowd is too big, the need is too great, and the resources are too few. But if we can all take the little bit that we have and the humble talents at our disposal and give them over to Jesus, he can make something amazing come from it. But first we have to have faith to act, to trust Jesus, to agree to be a part of what God is doing in the world no matter how silly or foolish or impossible it all seems. If we can each do just that much, God can work wonders.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Luke 10:25-37, NRSV