

Food for Hungry Souls

There are a variety of ways we could approach our Scripture passage for this morning, the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000 with two fish and five loaves. We could zero in on the numbers: 5000 men, 200 denari, 2 fish, 5 loaves, groups of 100 and groups of 50, 12 disciples, 12 basketfuls of pieces left over. There may be something special in the numbers.

We observe the characters: Jesus, disciples, the crowd; and, in John's gospel we find a boy with the small offering of loaves and fish. We will look at the characters this morning and try to determine where you and I fit into the story.

A third approach is similar to the second; we can listen to the voices and ask what they say. What does Jesus say? How about the disciples? What do we hear from the crowd? We can certainly learn something from the voices.

The fourth approach I would suggest this morning is to look at the story in context. Some of you may be catching on to my "sandwich approach." What comes before and after this event in Scripture? How does what comes before and what comes after help us to interpret what's going on in the middle? We will consider the surrounding context.

The fifth approach is to look at this story in the larger framework of Scripture as a whole. What other passages and Biblical themes does it bring to mind and how do these give us understanding? I think the big picture does have something to say to us here.

Finally, we want to think about the implications this story has for us. What is God telling us about our lives and ministries in our contemporary setting. What does all of this have to do with us? We will try to answer that question.

But before we get to all of that, the first observation I would make this morning is that we are sailing again. After Jesus was rejected in His hometown, he entered into an intense time of ministry in the surrounding towns, and also sent the disciples out

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two by two to duplicate and multiply His work. When the disciples returned, although they were excited about their mission and were eager to report to Jesus all that they had seen and done, we also get the feeling that they were quite tired from their labors. The news of the brutal slaying of John the Baptist, was sort of the last straw; According to Mark 6: 31 in the Today's English Version, Jesus says, "Let us go off by ourselves to some place where we will be alone and you can rest a while." The disciples needed rest; Jesus needed solitude for grieving, so they pile back in the boat and headed for what they considered to be a lonely place.

What happens next is a preacher on vacation's nightmare. I go away to get some rest and all of you are there waiting for me. You want me to preach and teach, visit with the sick, council with the troubled, answer you tricky questions, and feed you lunch to boot! **The preacher wouldn't be a happy camper!**

Jesus, however, doesn't flinch. It seems that He can take every circumstance and use it toward building the kingdom. In fact, we can see this as an extension of His training mission for the disciples. Notice how the action unfolds. Jesus sees the crowd and has compassion on them because He sees them like sheep without a shepherd. He casts off His own weariness and grief to teach them, and they respond by giving Him their undivided attention. Jesus forgets about His own needs and they forget about theirs. Spiritually speaking Jesus is feeding them and they are feeding Him. I'm reminded here of Jesus ministry to the Samaritan woman in John 4. He tells His disciples that He has found food that they don't know anything about.

It is the disciples here who get restless. They've been promised a vacation and they want to know when is it going to begin. "Jesus, it's getting late and the people must be getting hungry. Send them away so they can go to nearby farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat." While pretending concern for the crowd the disciples are really concerned for their own comfort. Here is where their training continues. Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

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The disciples immediately begin to whine. Where are we going to find food to feed this multitude? It would be more than half a year's wages to give everyone a small snack! Jesus, you've been out in the sun too long.

Jesus is resolute. Don't tell me what you don't have--"How much bread do you have?" The disciples check their resources; they report back that they have 5 loaves and two small fish. John tells us that the 5 loaves and two fish actually belong to a boy in the crowd. Apparently, he is willing to share.

At this point Jesus gives instruction for organizing the crowd into smaller groups of 100 or 50 (most of the Churches of God would fit into those categories.) Then Jesus takes the bread and fish and prays over them offering them to His Heavenly Father for His blessing. Then He breaks the bread and divides the fish and gives them to His disciples to give to the people. At that point something miraculous takes place; the bread and the fish are multiplied so that everyone has more than enough to eat, so that they are all satisfied. And there are 12 baskets of food left over.

I don't know if the particular numbers have any special significance. What I observe is that 12, 50, 100, 200, and 5000 are all round numbers and the 5 loaves plus 2 fish equal 7, the number of perfection. 12 disciples, when their resources are blessed by their Lord, have the capacity to feed the multitudes, especially when those multitudes are organized into groups of 50 and 100. I don't know for sure, but I think we've just stumbled on the solution to world hunger.

When we stop to consider the characters, it seems to me that there are three possibilities for us. For the most part I think we are represented by the disciples, and I suspect that our learning curve is similar to theirs. We are thinking about our next vacation while Jesus is asking us to meet the needs of the multitudes. We are looking at what we don't have, while Jesus is asking us what we do have: What can we offer that can be multiplied for the building of His kingdom? We can do more than we think if we will release our resources to Him.

It may also be true that some among us this morning find our place in the crowd. Since we've never really committed our lives to Jesus Christ to become His fully devoted followers, we are still lost like sheep without a shepherd. This Scripture calls us to put our trust in Him, pray to Him, and to receive the spiritual gifts He is ready to offer us.

A third possibility is that we are that boy mentioned by John. We are still part of the crowd, but we are standing on the threshold of entering in to a brand new life. We are willing to offer who we are and what we have to Jesus, to be used in His ministry to others. What we have to give may not amount to much, only 5 day old loaves and two very small fish, but we are willing to do our part, believing that the Lord is able to do His. Those who live in the sandals of this boy are not far from experiencing the miracle of the Kingdom of God.

When we listen to the voices speaking in today's Scripture, we hear the patient authority of Jesus, the bellyaching of the disciples, the murmuring of the crowd, and the quiet offer of the boy. The Lord invites each of us I think to listen to the sound of his own voice. Spiritually speaking am I a whiner, a moaner, or a believer? Am I just concerned with my own needs or am I willing to offer what I have to the Lord to meet the needs of others? What does your voice sound like here? What about mine? This passage invites us to distinguish among the voices.

As we turn to the question of context, we see that our Scripture today is sandwiched between the report of the death of John the Baptist and the story of Jesus walking on water. In John's gospel, it comes in the context of Jesus' teaching that He is the bread of life. In the larger context this story brings back memories of the wisdom of Jethro, who advised his son-in-law Moses to divide the children of Israel into groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and to appoint leaders over them. It also brings to mind God feeding the children of Israel with manna in the wilderness. We hear Jesus saying in John 6:32-33, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread

from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

And, all of a sudden we realize. The feeding of the 5000 is not about bread and fish; rather, it is about Jesus laying down His life for the sins of the world. The death of John foreshadows Jesus' death and His walking on water foreshadows His victory over death. The bread and fish that disciples of all time are to distribute is the message of the gospel.

The one glorious conclusion that we can draw from all of this is that Jesus' life and Jesus' death and His sacrifice and His resurrection and His grace are always sufficient to meet our needs. One Bible Commentator puts it this way, "The compassion of the Lord ever new, and ever assuming new forms.—How the disciples closed the day's work, and how the Master closed it.—The old and the new time as represented by these two sayings: 'Send the multitude away,' and, 'You give them something to eat—It is not necessary for them to go away.—It is not necessary to go away from Jesus for anything.'"* In other words, there is enough grace to forgive you and there is enough to forgive me. There is enough love and enough power to forgive and to transform our community. There is enough to save the world.

But we must also understand the challenge of our Scripture passage this morning. It calls for our involvement. We are called to share in Jesus' compassion for the multitudes, to see and to understand that so many are lost, like sheep without a shepherd. Knowing that we are not spiritual giants, we are nonetheless called to share what we know of Christ with others, believing that the Lord will abundantly bless and multiply all that we dare to offer. The needs will always appear greater than our resources, but if we are faithful and obedient to the Lord's call, there will be basketfuls of blessings left over for each of us. We have the opportunity every day to be a part of this miracle. The privilege of feeding the multitude with the Bread of Life continues.

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Mark 6:30-44

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