

## You Help Them!

Matthew 14:13-21

I may have told you about the brunch I enjoyed at Crystal in June with Beverly Peeler and Ann Coleman, who fed me when I had gone the women's retreat and found myself delayed because Leroy was in the hospital. The camp manager had fed me the night before, and I did not want to wear out my welcome, so I went to Pioneer cabin that Monday morning and refused to leave until my hosts graciously fed me. That morning I felt that I was miraculously fed.

On the face of it, the miracle of feeding the crowd gladdened the devil's heart—a trick with bread, an act of spiritual power with endless political potential. All it took was a hungry crowd, stranded in a lonely, desolate place, fed with food from nowhere by Jesus. The public, at that point in his life, at least, could not get enough of him, and because of their craving for his words, his touch, and his presence, they found themselves starving in the desert.

The first temptation that Jesus faced in the wilderness was to declare independence from God, to assert his autonomy. In the Scriptures this is the central sin, the primary act of rebellion, and Jesus refused to participate in it. He insisted that we are utterly dependent on God: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Human existence rests on the word of God. However, Jesus recognized that, while we may not live on bread *alone*, "without bread we cannot live." And, when manna rained down on the people of Israel in the wilderness, it was said that "mortals ate of the bread of angels" (Ps. 78:25).

There is a very real sense in which all bread is the bread of heaven. Jesus bore witness to the fact that "while it is a fruit of the earth, bread really comes down from above as the gift of God alone." **Iwan Russell-Jones**

This account of the feeding of five thousand has been an inspiration to Christians in many diverse situations. It occurs immediately after Jesus and the disciples learned of the brutal murder of John the Baptist and after a long day with large and desperate crowds. The disciples understandably were seeking to get away. They were grief stricken. So the disciples—as we would likely do—told the crowds to go away.

We read, however, that Jesus had compassion, and he invited the multitudes to eat. The disciples were shocked, for they could locate only two fish and five loaves, hardly enough to feed themselves, much less a crowd of thousands. Nevertheless, Jesus instructed them to feed the crowd. The disciples were in for surprise that evening—as they were often—at the miraculous power of God's love.

This is the only miracle story found in all four Gospels. It obviously was of great importance to the early church. Some suggest it was read regularly when early Christians gathered at the Eucharist. Others suggest that it shows a parallel to God's provision of manna from heaven for the children of Israel. More important than any of these reasons, this account of the feeding of the five thousand was treasured by the early church because it taught Christians the very heart of the gospel message and was a deep source of hope and inspiration for Christians who were seeking to be faithful against great odds. It is a story of great power because it demonstrates that God is love, teaches what it means to follow Christ, and assures us of God's power for good in the world.

Foremost, this story teaches us that God is love. The key reality is that Jesus had compassion. In spite of incredible pressures to the contrary, compassion for people was his prime motivation. It is a compassion that cares deeply about the most basic needs of all of us. It was concern that there be food for the hungry. God, who is the ultimate power of the universe, intends peace in the world, an end to hunger, the well-being of families, and spiritual wholeness for all people.

Another lesson we learn from this account is about being disciples—about the awesome responsibility that God has entrusted to us. Jesus did not feed five thousand. He told the disciples to do it. God has entrusted us to be the body of Christ—the hands and feet through which God's work is done in the world. God does not work alone, but through people, you and me. To follow Jesus is to express our faith in concrete acts of love, justice, and compassion toward others. It is no accident that Matthew tells us that we will meet Jesus in reaching out to the "least" of our brothers and sisters—the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned.

Most Bibles give a heading to this story that reads something like "Jesus Feeds Five Thousand." Actually, Jesus gave food only to the disciples, who then feed the others. While it is clearly the miracle of Jesus that feeds the multitude, this does not reduce the call to discipleship to a call of passive piety. Our call is to active ministry that meets human need. Jesus fed the Twelve; the Twelve fed the five thousand.

For us, this raises an obvious question: "In what ways have we been given blessed nourishment and failed to pass it along to people in need?" At first the disciples in this story did not respond to Jesus' command to give the crowd something to eat, but after the miracle they gave away what had been given to them.

A possible reason why the disciples may have been reluctant to act: they clearly thought that what they had was not enough. When Jesus ordered them to feed the crowd, they replied, "We have *nothing* here but five loaves and two fish." While it is true that what they had was meager, they described it as nothing. It is certainly true that our meagerness, in the hands of Jesus, becomes bounty. However, Jesus' first command to the disciples was, "You give them something to eat." Jesus transforms our humble offerings into more than we could have dreamed, but it is also true that Jesus is calling upon us to dream bigger. Jesus did not say, "Give me those fish and that bread, and I will feed them." His first call was for the disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world.

For disciples who think they have "nothing," the possibilities are necessarily small. What might have happened if one of the disciples had "looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves"? Of course we will not know. The more daunting question is, how many times have we heard our Lord say, "Give them something to eat," and because of our sense of powerlessness turned away? If we think our baskets contain "nothing," when in fact we have a few loaves and fish, or a few mustard seeds, or a little leaven, then Jesus has "nothing" with which to feed the hungry. **Dock Hollingsworth**

This Gospel story reminds us that when we need it most, God will give us the power to work for good in the world. When Jesus told the disciples to feed the five thousand, the disciples thought it was impossible. The needs were so great, and the resources were so few. However, when the disciples worked together and followed Jesus, they had more than enough.

The promise of this story of the feeding of the five thousand is that if we join together in unity and faithfulness, God will be with us. It is not a

promise of the absence of struggle and pain—Jesus even had to go the way of the cross—but a promise that God will be with us and that God's intention for love, peace, and justice in the world will ultimately prevail.

This is a promise that we badly need if we are even to dream about being faithful in carrying out the call of Christ to join Jesus in offering "life in fullness" to a world gripped by the forces of evil, which are driving millions of people and the planet itself into the most desperate of situations. We know that it is a promise the Lord kept with the disciples on that hillside in Galilee and has kept with God's faithful people over the centuries—and will keep with us!

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is very familiar to most Christians, but its message is always new:

- —That God loves and cares for every person on earth and that the promise of "life in fullness" extends to every creature and to the creation itself
- —That God calls us to be disciples—to be the means through which God's work is done in our world today
- —That God promises us in the Holy Spirit that the power of the love of God can break through even in the most unlikely places when we join together as faithful disciples seeking God's good intentions for our world

The events that took place on that hillside in Galilee two thousand years ago were a miracle to the five thousand people assembled that day. However, the deeper message is the miracle of God's love for the seven and a half billion people on our planet today and the miracle that we are called to

be partners with God in making fullness of life become a reality today for the world that God loves. **Clifton Kirkpatrick**

Dick Harmon likes to tell the story by the late Fred Craddock of how a restaurant became a place of worship for tired travelers and how soup and bread became Holy Communion. In our story of Jesus' feeding of the crowd, a desert place became a sanctuary and bread and fish became the Holy Communion, but Jesus did not chose to do this alone, he called his disciples to be the agents of God grace and abundance. It is the same now. We are the disciples who are called to see what we have and help those around us. We will be amazed when we see what God will do when we share what we have been given.

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