

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSV)

Now 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. [14] When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. [15] When 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." [16] Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." [17] They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." [18] And he said, "Bring them here to me." [19] Then 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. [20] And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. [21] And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

NO TIME ALONE

The background for our lesson today is the execution of John the Baptist. Jesus has just been given the terrible news. No doubt he needed some time alone to pray and think.

But, it seems like Jesus never gets the time alone that he needs. The people could see the sails of the fishermen as they made their way across the sea, and the crowds hustled along the shore toward the other side. In fact, they traveled so quickly that they were waiting for Jesus when he arrived on the other side.

Now how would you react in this situation? You have just heard that a friend has tragically died, and when you get home, the front porch is loaded with people who want something from you.

I know what I would do. I would tell those people, "Get out of here. Haven't I suffered enough for one day? I have my own problems. I don't have the energy to deal with your problems. Go home! I gave at the office."

That's what I would do.
But, that's not what Jesus did.

YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING

The Scripture tells us that Jesus had compassion on the crowds. Jesus felt their need deeply.

And so, Jesus, forgetting about his own need to pray and renew himself for the task ahead, goes to work. Jesus heals so many people that the rest of the day passes quickly. It is evening now, and the disciples come to remind Jesus of the facts of life.

"Jesus I know you said that man does not live by bread alone, but he doesn't live very long without bread either. It's time to send these people away. They're hungry. We're hungry, and all the places to eat will be closed unless you act right now. Send them away. Let someone else give them something to eat."

And that's when Jesus said it. The disciples couldn't believe their ears. Jesus said, "You give them something to eat." In the Greek language the "you" is emphatic. There is no question about what Jesus is asking his disciples to do. The ball is definitely in their court.

The disciples protest immediately. They say,

"Are you crazy Jesus? How can we feed all these people? Do you know what we have? We have nothing or at least next to nothing. We have five loaves of bread and two small fish.

How can we feed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two small fish? You can't even feed a large family with those meager resources. What we have is nothing in comparison to the need."

THE POWER OF COMPASSION

The disciples focused on what they lacked instead of what they had. The five loaves and two small fish seemed like nothing.

What they didn't count on was the power of compassion. The compassion of Jesus always had a way of multiplying blessings. Jesus told the disciples,

"Bring what you have to me.
What we have will be enough."

Actually, it was more than enough. Jesus called the people forward, gave thanks for the food that he had and distributed it to the people." Everyone ate and was filled, and they even had twelve baskets of food left over.

How can that be? How can you start out with five loaves of bread and end up with twelve baskets full of leftovers? That's the miracle; it's the miracle of multiplication.

The principle is this: bring what you have to God and no matter how small it seems God will multiply it. God is the God of abundance. The amount we get back is far greater than the amount we give.

AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

But, we must change our attitude. We tend to think that what we have is never enough. How many of us spend a lot of time complaining about what we don't have and what we can't do?

But, suppose, as an act of faith we said,

"Lord, I know it doesn't seem like much, but I am bringing what I have to you. Bless it and use it for the work of your kingdom."

What we have might go farther than we think.

SOMETHING GOOD OUT OF SOMETHING BAD

This past Friday there was a story in the Orlando Sentinel about a man by the name of Kirk Walker. Kirk was busy was building his dream home. Then hurricane Charley roared through.

It destroyed much of his work and left trees scattered all over his property. He said that it looked like a bomb had exploded in the area.

But, Kirk decided to do something positive in the face of destruction. Instead of bemoaning what he lost, Kirk decided to use what he had.

He used downed trees, fencing and other damaged structures as the raw material to build a 3200 square-foot, four-bedroom, 2 and ½ bath home.

His new home was recently completed and looks something like a mountain lodge.

There was a picture of his home in the paper, and it's beautiful.

But, Kirk is quick to add that his home is not made of perfect material. He said,

"Just because something isn't perfect doesn't mean it's not usable.

It's like people.

God doesn't expect us to be perfect, just useful.

... we have a unique house that has so many stories behind it. We will have many fond memories of making something good happen out of a bad situation."

I think Kirk's story is a good example of what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples.

Yes, things were not going well for Jesus and his disciples. A great religious leader had been executed, Jesus was no doubt exhausted from a day of touching those in need, and they didn't really have much in the way of resources.

But, God through His Son, Jesus was going to show the world how something good could come out of a bad situation.

God through Jesus was going to show how the whole world could be saved by the loving sacrifice of His Son.

A SYMBOLIC STORY

Many commentators think that the feeding of the five thousand is a foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper. According to biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann,

"The orderly arrangement of the people, the prayer of invocation and the blessing, the liturgical act of breaking the bread, the immediate parallel to the death of John the Baptist -- all are unmistakable clues that point to the celebration of the Lord's Supper."

You see, this miracle story is also a symbolic story. It is more than a story about how a lot of people had a good meal long ago. It's a story about the meaning of the life of Jesus. It's a story about how one man really could change the course of human history.

How could that be? How could the sacrifice of one man change the world? No matter how compassionate or caring one man might be, you would think that the need of the world is just too great. It would be foolish to think that the life and sacrificial death of one man could really make a difference.

But, that kind of thinking fails to take into consideration the fact that this particular man was also God in the flesh. This kind of thinking fails to take into consideration the fact that resources are never too few when they are placed in the hands of the Master who created the heavens and the earth.

Even death on a cross can be transformed by God's power into a symbol of hope and salvation.

WHAT KIND OF MIRACLE?

Over the years there has been a bit of controversy over how to interpret this passage. Some with a modern bias against the supernatural say that what happened that day long ago really wasn't a miracle. When the disciples began to share what they had with the crowd, there were others in the crowd who were inspired to do the same thing. Since everyone shared there was more than enough for everyone to eat and be satisfied.

I have always believed that nothing is impossible with God. There is no need to "explain away" miracles. Surely the Creator of all that is could have miraculously multiplied a few loaves and the fishes. Just as God fed his people in the wilderness with manna so God through Christ could have miraculously fed 5,000 in another wilderness setting.

But, we can have an orthodox view of God's power and still not understand the point of the miracle. The point of this miracle was to inspire all disciples to do what they can for the world in the name of Jesus.

If, as some have suggested, people shared food with each other in response to Jesus giving them five loaves and two small fish, would it then not qualify as a miracle?

I would say that in a sense it would be an even greater miracle. The greatest miracle of all is when the human heart is changed by the love

of God in Jesus Christ. That miracle creates a renewable resource that will continue for many years to come.

And that's the point of the story. Miracles begin with us. Jesus still tells his disciple,
"You give them something to eat."

In other words, miracles begin when we take what we have and use it.

God has given us food. It is up to us to distribute it.
God has given us money. It is up to us to donate it.
God has given us time and abilities. It is up to us to volunteer them.

FAITH AND WORKS

I am deeply concerned about consumer-minded church members with a "serve me first" attitude.

This story suggests that we need to be just the opposite. Disciples of Christ are first and foremost servants who bring what they have to others in the name of Jesus.

Don't misunderstand.
It's not that we think that we can "bring in the kingdom" by ourselves, far from it.
What we have to offer is often quite meager in comparison to the great need of the world.

But, in faith we just choose to light one candle rather than curse the darkness.
We choose (as James put it) to show our faith by our works. (James 2:18)

We put our meager resources to work while looking for a greater miracle.
What we do is like casting seeds into the garden.

The harvest is often much greater than the seeds we sow.

THE EARLY CHURCH

It's amazing how the compassion of Christ can multiply resources.
In fact, this was the story of the early church.

When you read the book of Acts in the Bible, the first stories of the early church are about how the Holy Spirit came down and changed the disciples and those around them.

And how did the Spirit change them? One of the most significant ways was in their lifestyle.

The Spirit filled Christians loved one another. They had compassion towards one another, and that compassion was demonstrated by a life of sharing. They sold what they had and gave the proceeds to those who had the greatest need.

In this way, the Christian community was from the very beginning a marvel to the rest of the world. Many wanted to be a part of this community. It was like nothing anyone had ever seen before. It was a miracle.

The famous preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, once said, "Every tomorrow has two handles. We can take hold of tomorrow with the handle of anxiety, or we can take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith."

Jesus taught his disciples to take hold of tomorrow with the handle of faith.

I think this story of the feeding of the 5,000 is in all four gospels because it represents the essence of the New Testament faith. The story tells us that a Spirit of hope and faith is still possible, even when the biggest storms come our way.

A MIRACLE AT OUR PLACE

After months of hard work and years of saving, Reb and Jackay were ready to open their first restaurant. All they needed was the final health inspection and their business permit. That was scheduled for first thing that morning; then "Our Place," as they called their restaurant would be open for business.

But that morning the winds and rains of Hurricane Hugo hit unexpectedly. The powerful storm made its way 200 miles inland to their North Carolina town. Trees were uprooted, power lines were down, homes and stores were destroyed.

Reb and Jackay hurried to their restaurant. Much to their relief they found that everything was still intact. They had been very fortunate.

But, not everyone had been so fortunate. A deputy sheriff pulled up and told them that their restaurant, the fire station next door and a service station down the road were the only ones that still had electricity.

Reb and Jackay called the health inspector to come immediately so they could open, but because of the power outage, he couldn't get into his office to issue the permit.

With no permit, the business would not open. But, they had a refrigerator stocked with 300 pounds of bacon, bushels of tomatoes, lettuce and bread. What could they do?

They decided to give the food away so it wouldn't go to waste.

They told the deputy,
"Tell your coworkers and other emergency people you see that we'll have free BLT's and coffee for anybody who wants to drop by."

Soon firemen, policemen, linemen and other workers were filing into "Our Place."

When the couple heard that another restaurant was gouging people by charging ten dollars for two eggs, toast and bacon, they placed a sign in their window:
FREE BLT'S--FREE COFFEE.

Families, travelers and street people were all welcomed for a meal.

Then something began to happen. People started to pitch in and help. Some cleaned the counters and swept the floors. Volunteers took over the dish washing from Jackay; others helped Reb at the grill.

A local radio station heard what was going on at "Our Place" and began to broadcast the news. People from a neighboring town that had not been too badly hit by the storm brought in food from their freezers. Stores and dairies sent over chicken, milk and foodstuffs of all kinds.

When all was said and done, those first cups of coffee and BLT's somehow were stretched to 16,000 meals!

The restaurant's small stock increased by 500 loaves of bread, cases of mayonnaise, 350 pots of coffee and bushels of produce. They had more when they finished than when they first began!

Whenever people share, I think it is a kind of miracle. It increases our resources, and more importantly, it changes our identity.

And when we share in the name of Christ, it becomes an act of faith.

A MIRACLE AT OUR CHURCH

That's what I like about this church.
You have always been willing to share in the name of Christ.

When it looked like the community's feeding program for the homeless, Daily Bread would no longer have a place to meet, this church was willing to share its facilities for many years until a permanent location could be found. When Alcoholics Anonymous needed a place to meet, you were willing to share.

When our children needed an education, the Presbyterian Women created a student loan fund. When a church needed a roof in Africa, you gave enough money to make it happen.

When the Presbyterian churches in this area decided to build a Habitat home, you gave generously not only of your money but also of your time. Last year despite the expenses many of you incurred due to the hurricanes, you gave generously so that Edith White could have money to help the desperately poor people she serves with her work in Africa.

When a church was destroyed by the hurricane, you were willing to give them a place to worship. When a Brazilian congregation wanted to start a new worship group, you gave permission for them to worship in our building on Sunday nights.

When the neighboring Methodists needed a place for their "young at heart" group to meet because part of their facility is still under repair due to the hurricanes, you gave them permission to come and share with us. Each year our church is a leading contributor to the Crop Walk.

When a roof needed to be repaired, you gathered on a Saturday to get the job done. When a wheelchair ramp needed to be built, you were there. When medical bills needed to be paid, you stepped forward.

This year the Session has approved holding a concert along with the members of the Spanish and Brazilian churches to raise money for new church development in our Presbytery. I know that it will be a success because you have track record of generosity.

Appearances can be deceiving. Our church building is one the smallest in this Presbytery. When people ask me to describe this church, I say that it's what I might call a "blue collar" church. Many of us are retired and on a fixed income. Most of us don't have that much money.

But, you have been willing to bring what you have to the Lord. You have been willing to take your five loaves and two small fish and use it for the work of the kingdom.

I say this not so that we can rest on our laurels, but to encourage us to do even more in the days ahead. There will certainly be times when we will be discouraged. Like the disciples we might want to say,

"Send them away.

We don't have the resources to get the job done."

But, we know better.

The miracle of multiplication still occurs.

Let's just bring what we have to God and see what happens.

Let me close with the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians. I think they apply to us as well. Paul wrote,

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6 (NRSV)

God has given us more than enough. May we have the faith to act upon that promise.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN