

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Mark 6: 30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So, they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things. By this time, it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So, they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

More than Enough

Booker T. Washington, the great African American educator, author, orator and advisor to presidents, was fond of telling a story:

A ship, lost at sea in the Atlantic Ocean along the northern coast of South America for many days, suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel came the signals: "Water, Water, We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel came back at once: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time the signal: "Water, send us water!" from the distressed vessel. And was answered again "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was again answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are."

The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket. It came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River, which actually extends miles and miles out into the ocean in what is called the "River Sea". *(as found in an article from Patheos, July 15, 2012 by Alyce McKenzie, "Feeding the Five Thousand: Not Just Another Church Potluck")*

The feeding of the five thousand bears a lot in common with that story – for first, there is deep need. If you remember, the disciples were weary after going out two

by two teaching in Jesus name. They come back to Jesus and he wants to find them rest. But there is further backdrop to this story. Jesus has recently learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. Grieving people need rest and refreshment too. But the crowd follows Jesus and the disciples, looking for leadership. Jesus looks upon them, and seeing they are like “sheep without a shepherd” Jesus has compassion on them. So, he teaches them, perhaps for a very long time, because it is the disciples who finally pull him aside and say hey now, it is late, and these people need food. It’s time to, you know, give the benediction, send them on their way. We don’t know if the crowd could just go to neighboring town to eat, or if they had the means to do that, but the main thing we hear is *the disciples are done*. And they think Jesus should be too.

Yet where the disciples see needs far more than they can meet, Jesus sees needs that God can meet. So, he prompts them to find out what’s available. “Two fish and five loaves of bread” is what they report back. Not a lot to work with, ya know?

If you go to the Holy Land, you see this image in many places -- a simple folk art drawing of two fish and five loaves. In a giftshop in Tagbha on the Northern Shore of Galilee, (where it is said the miracle took place) the image is on everything -- trivets and T-shirts, dishtowels and postcards.

It is not a lot, two fish and five loaves. It might have fed Jesus and the disciples, taken the edge off But, certainly not that huge crowd.

I thought about putting that simple image –two fish, five loaves – on the front of our bulletin cover today. But I liked the fanciful image you see there. Jesus and the disciples and all those hungry people. And a whole tide of fish about to wash over them, and platters on the ground, bearing much more than two and five.

It’s as we said earlier the one miracle story that gets all four of the gospel writers attention. It is right up there with the resurrection. A story that would have been told over and over. A story the early church held on to for its life-giving properties.

The story gives us several details. First, that Jesus tells the disciples to tell the crowds to sit *in groups* on the *green* grass. In groups of hundreds and fifties they sit down, which might have been where the head count came from...though, as is often pointed out, if it was truly five thousand men then maybe the crowd was way bigger, women and children being also in attendance, but in those days, not counted. Second, the detail that Jesus took what had been gathered up, *looked up to heaven*, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave it to the disciples to set before the people. Jesus compassion was toward the crowd, but his eyes were lifted heavenward. Jesus, who believed that with God all things are possible, believed that with God out of such meager rations the people could indeed be fed.

The passage we are encountering today, by the way, has a parallel in the Old Testament.

In Second Kings, the prophet Elisha is in the company of the Kings army. There is a famine in the land, and they are making a stew from plants that turn out to be poisonous, so the whole mess has to be thrown out. A man comes bringing Elisha "bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley." "And Elisha said, "Give to the men, that they may eat." But his servant said, "How am I to set this before a hundred men?" So, Elisha repeats, "give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, "they shall eat and have some left." So, he set it before them, And they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. (II Kings 4:42-44)

Bible scholars want us to know that this passage points both backwards and forwards. It points backwards not only to Elisha and that feeding but to Moses, who led the people through the wilderness, fed as they were by manna and quails, enough for each day. It points forward to the messianic feast, where "people will gather from east and west, north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God", words often part of our communion liturgy. A vision of everyone included, and everyone fed.

It's interesting isn't it, that some forms of Christianity got so hyper-focused on individual salvation when the biblical image of the end of time is a big family meal, everyone around the table, enough for all.

As we come to the table today, we may have questions, like those first disciples, wondering to ourselves will there truly be enough? Like the people on the boat, like the children of Israel wandering in the desert, we wonder in times, stressful times, desperate times, if our luck has run out and we'll die depleted and forsaken. Some of us are here today feeling tired from family challenges, wondering in the caregiving we are doing, or in the crises we are facing if we really will be given enough fortitude, patience and courage to make our way through these days, to see it all through. Others of us have demands coming at us from our work lives. I know I feel this. New initiatives, 2020 coming, new people to welcome, another week and another sermon to write, ever deepening concern about the opioid crisis in this town and how we might help address it. Will there be enough of me and of this congregation to do this work? We can find ourselves looking at ourselves and thinking "not enough". Not enough (you fill in the blank) time, energy, attention, love, money, encouragement....and often, not enough *self* to go around.

And what about our wider world? If we do remember to look to God, as Jesus does, we may think the current problems of our world may be more than even God can address.

This passage calls to mind a time in another church, when I was an interim pastor. It was a church that needed to focus on stewardship, that asked me as interim to help with that. In the midst of this, a man asked if he might come and talk with me. "I know what you are saying is biblical" this man said. "I know I need to give" he said. "But it is so hard for me. I grew up poor, and in my family, we hardly knew if we'd have food on the table.

There was so much anxiety about money...it is very hard for me to ever believe that there is enough. It was wonderful, actually, that this man wanted to have this honest conversation. This man was an attorney. He had enough money to live in a nice house, and to send his kids to college. But it was hard to give anything away. It was hard to believe that there would be enough.

Fred Craddock, a most marvelous preacher, tells of being asked to preach at a church in Toronto, where the church put him up in a very elegant hotel for retirees, with a very elegant restaurant. Dinner was formal, in dress, in food, in service. Every night as he looked about the restaurant, he noticed guests putting little packets of sugar, butter, cream in their purses, or suitcoat pockets. The day of his departure, he reported this to the manager of the place. He didn't want to be a snitch, he wanted an interpretation. The man smiled, said he knew, and every two weeks, while guests were at dinner, workers went into the rooms and cleared out the contraband. "You see," he said, "All the guests here in their early years experienced the Great Depression." As with the attorney from the former church all the years of prosperity did not fully erase the uncertainty, the economic deprivation and the fear of hunger. (from Fred Craddock, *Reflections on My Call to Preach*, p. 3)

What shall we say to this? I think only that on some level many of us can relate to these stories. We harbor some fear. We say the 23rd psalm, we know God provides, but well, maybe not. Here's the good news: God who loves us loves us just as we are. God knows our fears, our insecurities, knows what we've experienced in the past. But God loves us too much to let us stay in a fearful place. In Jesus we are continually led to believe, as he believed, that with God there will be enough. For years this passage has been precious to Christians, and I think this is the reason why. The story wants to gently shake us out of the fear, wants to call forth in us a deeper trust.

So, let's not talk about how what really happened in the feeding of the five thousand is that everyone took out the food that they had hidden away for themselves, and the whole thing became like a giant potluck, a common interpretation of the story. If this story is to have its way with us, it's more than "put down your bucket where you are" because there are human resources you didn't realize were there. Now that's not a bad message...it's a good one, actually...but I think there is more here. I think the power of this story is not so much "see what happens when we all share" but *see what happens with a little when the power of God is behind it*. Five loaves and two fish is not very much to start with. But Jesus looked to heaven and he prayed over that small beginning. And look what very little *became*.

Hear the reflection of author and preaching professor Alyce McKenzie:

With age has come a degree of wisdom. I now realize how little one person can accomplish in the big scheme of things. This is liberating knowledge. I also realize how important that little bit can be. That is motivating knowledge. That is the work of God. Jesus blesses, not several tables groaning under the weight of the bounty we have

prepared and brought (as in a potluck supper) but five loaves and two fish. Jesus' version of a church supper—this "Lord's Supper"—is a demonstration of grace: God doing in and through us things we could not do on our own steam; God moving mountains with faith the size of a grain of mustard seed. (Patheos article, quoted earlier)

A demonstration of grace. As we come to Jesus table today, may our eyes be opened. May we see possibility -- the possibility of abundance -- A veritable tidal wave of fish, a bucket of clear fresh water. May we believe in a Shepherd God who can lead us out of scarcity thinking, fearful thinking into deeper trust and abundant life. May we believe in a Shepherd God who will not only supply our need but who will do something with our lives that we could not have imagined on our own. May we cast down our buckets and drink fully of God's amazing grace here right now, all around us.

Amen.