

## Food for the Hungry

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 can 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 imagine where we fit into the story.

A third approach is to 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**. We might call this the "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? How does this event fit in the larger context of the whole Bible? We will consider the context.

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.

Our Scripture from Mark 6 begins like this: Verses 30-31 say: *"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."

After Jesus was rejected in His hometown (Mark 6:1-6), He entered into an intense time of ministry in the surrounding towns, and also sent the disciples out two by two to duplicate and multiply His work (Mark 6:7-13). When the disciples returned, they were excited about their

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mission and were eager to report to Jesus all that they had seen and done (Mark 6:30). Nevertheless, everybody was tired.

Those of us who traveled to New Mexico on our recent mission trip can identify with the feeling. We came back excited about what we had experienced, but we were also tired. The younger members of the team did better, but it took Betty Jane and I at least three days to catch our breath.

The other thing that came into play with Jesus and His disciples was the news of the brutal slaying of John the Baptist at the hand of king Herod; this was sort of the last straw. Intense ministry is tiring enough but great grief is exhausting. Jesus and His disciples needed rest, and Jesus especially needed space for grieving, so they piled into their boat and headed for what they considered to be a lonely place, a place for solitude.

But this little get away didn't go exactly as planned. Mark 6:32-33 say: *"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."*

This is the preacher's vacation nightmare. I go away to get some rest and when I get to where I'm going to be refreshed, 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! **Under those circumstances, 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.

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It is the disciples here, not Jesus, 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."*

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 (200 denari) to give everyone even a small snack!"* Jesus, you've been out in the sun too long!

But, 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. The Gospel of 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. 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. In that moment something miraculous takes place; the bread and the fish are multiplied so that everyone has more than enough to eat. 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 biblical 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 the problem of 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. We are hungry, hoping to be fed, but we don't know what this all means. This Scripture calls us to put our trust in Him, pray to Him, and to receive the spiritual food 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 or her 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 find ourselves 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 (Mark 6:45-52). In the larger context this story brings back memories of the wisdom of Jethro, who advised his weary 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 food that disciples of all time are to distribute to the people of all time 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. There is enough grace to forgive you and there is enough grace 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 multitudes with the Bread of Life continues.

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Mark 6:30-44

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