

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for July 26, 2015 ~ Proper 12B
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In some ways, The Feeding of the Five Thousand was the most impressive miracle Jesus had performed up until this point in his ministry. This event in the life of Jesus, also known as The Feeding of the Five Thousand, is the only miracle to be recorded in all four Gospels. Those with the inclination to do so could have explained many of the other miracles away, but not this one.

Three factors made the Feeding of the Five Thousand into what we might call a "media event." First is the fact that there were over five thousand witnesses. Second, they were in a wide-open place. There was no place where enough food to feed that big a crowd could have been hidden. Everyone could see the miracle with their own eyes. And third, the miracle met an immediate need, not just of one person among many onlookers, but also of every single person in the crowd. So they were all focused on what was happening. You can't silence five thousand plus witnesses to an event and nor can you dismiss their testimony.

What then is the theological and spiritual significance of this miracle?

Firstly, Jesus is revealed as the Ruler of Creation, the One who multiplies food in Nature. In his classic work *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis shows how many of the miracles take what God normally does slowly in Nature and speeds it up dramatically as a kind of flourished signature, signifying, "the One who always multiplies fish and grain is here."

Secondly, Jesus is also revealed as the Ruler who provides. And what does he provide here? What promise does he keep? What need does he meet? Is it the need of the hungry or is it the need of the disciples? Or is it both? He has commanded the disciples to feed the people and that elicits their admission that they are not able to do it. Then, to their amazement, he tells them to have the people sit on the grass anyway. The need being met here is not only the people's need for food, though of course that is abundantly provided for. The other need that is met is the disciples' need to be able to minister! It is not the people's ability to eat so much as the disciples' ability to serve, not so much the people's need to be fed as the disciples' ability to feed them. Jesus Christ still provides for his servants today in the same way. Not one of us could so much as give a cup of cold water in his name in a way that would truly glorify him apart from the grace that makes it possible. Do we wish to serve the Lord? Do we confess our utter inability to do so worthily? Do you have just five loaves and two fish? Then you are in the same position as Jesus' disciples were on this day. He has not changed his administrative policy. It is our job only to make our inadequate loaves and fishes available. It is his job to make them enough.

The people got a good meal but the disciples received something far more significant. They got another in the series of lessons in faith that Luke seems to be presenting. We have already seen in the Stilling of the Storm that faith is an understanding of who Jesus is that produces confidence in his solution of our problems. We saw with the healing of the Woman with the Hemorrhage that it is a personal response to Jesus as Lord and Savior, not a superstitious trust in externals. What will John add to that understanding today?

There's a problem. Jesus points it out when he says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Notice that Jesus starts with the premise that the people need to be fed. Our text says that Jesus

said this to Philip to test him. Jesus already knew what he was going to do. Philip's response to Jesus sounds so familiar. "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Followers of Jesus continue to say something similar when challenged with doing something remarkable in response to the call of Jesus. "We don't have enough!" "Where's the money going to come from?" But, there's always one like Andrew who understands. When God is calling us to do something, the faithful response is to start looking for the resources, the means with which to accomplish the task. Andrew gets it. He says, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." That was another way of saying, "Watch, and be amazed!"

He gave thanks and distributed the food to the five thousand people sitting on the grass. And when his disciples gathered up the *fragments*, so that nothing would be lost, there were twelve baskets full. The people saw the sign and believed.

This is the most interesting and instructive moment in the whole story. For it shows that the disciples had learned something from those previous lessons. In the face of the seemingly impossible, they obeyed. And, they did it immediately. Before Jesus had multiplied a single loaf or fish, they obeyed him. Jesus had not even told them what he was planning to do yet they trusted him to come through. He just took the meager provisions they had and told them to arrange the people to be served. If only the disciples could have responded like this more consistently! If only we would!

The disciples obeyed, and in that obedience they learned another important lesson about faith, one whose elements are still present in every mighty work of God: Need seen + desire felt + inadequacy confessed + Christ obeyed = the opportunity for God to work in miraculous ways. It is our job only to make our inadequate loaves and fishes available. It is his job to make them enough. Faith is the determination to obey in spite of our inadequacy, to consider our own inability irrelevant in the light of his ability, and to act on that basis. The more we do so, the more we will find our own paltry loaves and fishes multiplied.

In each of the four Gospels, this event is a turning point – a time of transition – in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Disciples often learn important lessons during times of transition. It marks the apex of his popularity with the multitudes, and understandably so. But from this point his popularity begins to decline. Why? Because in each Gospel Jesus now concentrates his teaching on preparing himself and his disciples for the Cross. From this moment he starts toward Jerusalem and the way of the Cross. It is not easy to obey, to sit people down at the table when you do not yet see any fish or bread to set before them. But the greater test of faith is to follow Christ in the way that leads to the cross. We are as inadequate to this as we were to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two small fish. But, by the grace of Jesus Christ, those hungry people were fed by those disciples. And, by the same grace, the hungry people who are standing at those doors are going to be fed by the disciples in this place because as we walk with him in the way of the cross, the Sovereign of our lives and of all Creation empowers us and says to us, "You give them something to eat!"

- According to the U.S.D.A., 17.5 million households, (14.5 percent of all U.S. households) are referred to as food insecure to the extent that one or more household members were hungry at least some time during the year because they could not afford enough food. In Wyoming, one in eight persons struggles with hunger.

- 25% of all students in the Teton County public schools qualify for the Free or Reduced Meals Program. In the elementary grades, one in three qualify.
- In 2014, the Jackson Cupboard, which operates out of St. John's Church, served 8,584 hungry people in our own community.

Whatever they had, in the hands of Jesus, turned out to be more than enough. Twelve baskets of leftovers. Too little, in the hands of Jesus, becomes a bountiful surplus. Twelve baskets. Everybody was fed, everybody's hunger was satisfied, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers, enough to feed another multitude. None of the Gospel writers tells us what happened with the leftovers. Don't you wish they had? I have a hunch you'll be tasting some of them in just a few minutes.