

YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

Matthew 14:13-21

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PROLOGUE

A little boy, who was especially fond of the lazy days of summer, was asked in Sunday school what his favorite story from the Bible was. He thought for a moment and then replied, "I really likes the story 'bout the multitude that loafes and fishes." But the real story is not about loafing. It is about loving, as God has loved us.

SCRIPTURE

[The feeding of the five thousand is found in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).]

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 (Matthew 14:13-21 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Following the death of his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus continued to minister to the great crowds that came seeking his help. Near the end of one particularly long and exhausting day, Jesus' disciples came to him and said, "Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (vs. 15). The disciples were being very practical here. The people needed to eat, and they were in the middle of nowhere. Yet, here is where the story begins to get interesting. Jesus said to his disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (14:16). And before the sun set, thousands of people were fed from five barley loaves and two fish.

We call this the story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes but it is much more than that - it is really the story of the multiplication of the Lord's compassion. The lesson being that our Lord's compassion can be multiplied in and through us.

1. YOU (HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO) GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

When Jesus said, "You give them something to eat", he was telling his disciples, "You have the responsibility to give them something to eat." This story is not just about Jesus. It is also about any person who sincerely wishes to be his follower.

The traditional view of this story is that it reveals that Jesus was a wonder-worker, that he had supernatural power to perform miracles, that he was and is the very Son of God. Now I believe that this is an account of a miracle and I certainly believe that Jesus was and is the very Son of God. But there is also something wrong with the traditional view. It paints Jesus as a remote and distant deity who has little to do with our ordinary, everyday lives. I believe that this view is just the opposite of what was intended. The story, properly understood, not only reveals the compassion of Jesus, but how this compassion gets multiplied through his disciples.

We know from the context of this story that Jesus had been in his home town where he was treated with disrespect (Matt 13:53-58). Later he learned that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been killed by Herod (Matt 14:1-12). So it should come as no surprise to us that after this, Jesus sought some peace and quiet on the other side of the large lake known as Galilee. But instead of solace and solitude, he found a vast crowd eagerly demanding what he could give. He might easily have resented them. What right had they to invade his privacy with their continual demands? Was he to have no rest and quiet, no time to himself at all? In spite of this, he had compassion on them. Does this not speak volumes about the nature of God's love for us? Does this not also speak volumes about how we are to show love to others? Now I admit, loving others is not always easy to do.

The story is told about Henry Cadbury, a famous Quaker who helped translate the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and was chair of the American Friends Service Committee. Cadbury was known as a gentle person with a loving spirit, but one day a neighbor observed another side of him. Cadbury had just put the finishing touches on a portion of sidewalk he was replacing when a child came running down the street and skipped through the wet concrete, leaving mushy footprints. The gentle Quaker exploded with anger. His neighbor admonished, "Why, Henry, I'm surprised to see you so angry. I thought you liked children." Henry replied, "I do like children in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

Most Christians find it easy to love people in the abstract but not so easy to love them in the concrete. Jesus showed us the nature of God's love when he showed compassion at a time when he could have easily been angry and resentful. Later, Jesus would show an even

greater display of God's love when he suffered and died on the cross for our sins. In Romans 5:8 we read, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take comfort from the fact that there is nothing you can do to thwart the love of God or make God love you any less. And if we have been so comforted then we can let God's love live in us so that we can love others as Christ has loved us.

2. YOU (WILL BE PROVIDED THE MEANS TO) GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

When Jesus said, "You give them something to eat", he was about to teach his disciples, "You will be provided the means to give them something to eat."

But when Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd, they balked and said to him that all they had were five loaves and two fish. Yet with what they brought to him, Jesus wrought a miracle. Jesus sets before every one of us the tremendous task of communicating himself to others; but he does not demand from us resources that we do not possess. He says to us in effect, "Come as you are, bring to me what you have, however little, and I will use it greatly in my service."

A second interpretation of this passage comes to us from the Middle Ages and is still held by some today. It is called the sacramental view. In this view, the story of the feeding of the five thousand can only be understood in light of the Lord's Supper. These people argue that any historical details are unimportant for this was not a meal where people glutted their physical appetite; but a meal where they ate the spiritual food of Christ. There have been frescoes uncovered from the Middle Ages that make the barley loaves and two fish into Eucharistic symbols, that is, elements of the Lord's Supper.

Now I do not deny that after the death and resurrection of Christ some Christians would have seen parallels between the story of the feeding of the five thousand and the Lord's Supper. And I can kind of see a connection between the bread of this story and the bread of Communion. But how fish get turned into wine is beyond me! Even apart from the revolting image this produces in one's mind the Scriptures make no mention of this whatsoever. Those who stress the Eucharistic significance in this event render it meaningless at the time it occurred.

But the sacramental view is not all bad. Something spiritual is being emphasized here. But we need to understand that the opposite of spiritual is not physical. The opposite of spiritual is superficial. The feeding of the five thousand is a spiritual lesson in the meaning of compassion. Compassion is not meant to be superficial. It is meant to be substantive. We are to love people and use things but too often we love things and use people.

A wealthy CEO was driving his BMW down the highway, singing to himself, "I love my BMW, I love my BMW." Focusing on his car, not his driving, he smashed into a tree. He miraculously survived, but the accident totaled his car. "My BMW! My BMW!" he sobbed. A good Samaritan stopped to help the man and cried out, "Sir, sir, you're bleeding. And-your . . . your left arm is gone!" Horrified, the man screamed, "My Rolex! My Rolex!"

Compassion means loving people more than things and having a concern for the whole person. Why did Jesus feed the crowd? Because they were hungry (duh!). And he did not just give them barley loaves and fish. Matthew tells us that he healed them. Mark tells us that Jesus also taught them. Luke is more specific in his account, Jesus taught them about the kingdom of God and he healed those who needed to be healed.

Compassion, then, is more than a feeling. It is a concern for the whole person, giving people what they need (although not necessarily what they desire), giving people what they need even if they do not deserve it. We see this in the actions of Jesus.

Jesus did not feed the crowd with consecrated wafers or tiny cubes of bread that symbolized food. He feed them with real food and they were satisfied. Jesus did not teach them how to get rich quick, climb the ladder of success or unlock the hidden child within, he taught them that God is our King and we owe him our allegiance, even our very lives. Jesus did not heal everyone, did not make everyone feel good, but as the Scripture says, he healed those who needed to be healed. Compassion means being concerned for the whole person and giving people what they need.

3. YOU (ARE TO CONTINUE TO) GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

When Jesus said, "You give them something to eat", he was not implying this was a one time thing for which they never have to be concerned again. The ministry of compassion through healing, teaching and feeding is the ongoing work of Christ-followers of every generation.

There is another interpretation of this passage that comes from the late 19th century and is still popular today. The people who hold this view say there was no miracle, no display of the supernatural. There is a perfectly natural explanation of what happened. What really happened was this -- The people in the crowd brought their own food but because they were selfish they were reluctant to let anybody know. Jesus sensed this and took the lead. Such food as he and his disciples had, he began to share with a blessing and an invitation and a smile. And thereupon all began to share, and before they knew what was happening, there was enough and more than enough for all.

This interpretation does violence to the text. It is based on the idea that miracles are a holdover from an ancient and superstitious past and no modern, intelligent person could

ever believe in them today. I do not share this interpretation, but even so, there is some truth to it. As followers of Christ we do have a responsibility to carry out his work. The story tells us that Jesus gave to his disciples and the disciples gave to the crowd. Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples that day, and he still does today. If you are a follower of Jesus, regardless of your age, gender or nationality, you have work to do - the Lord's work!

CONCLUSION

The story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes is really the story of the multiplication of the Lord's compassion. Without the love and power of Christ in our lives our compassion will be in short supply. But through an active faith in Jesus Christ his compassion can be multiplied in and through us. We can love people in the concrete even when tempted to be angry or resentful. We can be concerned for the whole person and meet real needs. We can carry out the work of Christ in the world and tell others the good news of the Gospel. We really can give the world something to eat.