

GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

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University Congregational Church

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Reading: Matthew 14: 13 – 21 (NEB)

When he heard what had happened (the beheading of John the Baptist) Jesus withdrew privately by boat to a lonely place; but people heard of it, and came after him in crowds by land from the towns. When he came ashore, he saw a great crowd; his heart went out to them, and he cured those of them who were sick. When it grew late the disciples came up to him and said, “This is a lonely place and the day has gone; send the people off to the villages to buy themselves food.” He answered, “There is no need for them to go; give them something to eat yourselves.” “All we have here,” they said, “is five loaves and two fishes.” “Let them have them,” he replied. So he told the people to sit down on the grass; then, taking the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples; and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate to their hearts’ content; and the scraps left over, which they picked up, were enough to fill twelve great baskets. Some five thousand men shared in this meal, to say nothing of the women and children.

The feeding of the five thousand is a Bible story that most of us grew up with and have heard many times over. It is sometimes referred to as “the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.” Matthew points out that was 5,000 the men, “to say nothing of the women and children.” We could probably guess there were 10,000 to 15,000 people. If you believe in such miracles, that is astounding. If you do not believe in such miracles, the story is only that much more improbable.

If you have read, heard, or studied this story as many times as I have you know that preachers have been trying to explain away this passage in the hope that we can walk away from it with a moral principle that we can all believe in. You have heard the following argument: The people really had packed a picnic for the day. They had their supper hidden beneath their robes and cloaks. When they saw the generosity of Jesus they broke out their own lunch pails, everybody shared, and there was plenty left

over. But I wonder if this approach makes the story more convoluted and complicated than it needs to be.

I sometimes think we are like the man who was talking to his doctor about his future health and the possibility of going into a nursing home. He wanted to make this decision before he lost his mind to dementia. The doctor said, “Well actually there is a pretty simple test in answer to your question. Imagine a large bathtub filled with water. You are asked how you would empty the tub. Beside the tub is a spoon and a bucket.”

“Oh, that’s simple,” said the patient. “I would use the bucket. It would be much faster.”

“Well,” said the doctor, “most people would just pull the plug. Would you prefer a bed by the window or the doorway?”

I think there are very simple movements in this story that are worthy of our belief. The first is that Jesus loved these people. Matthew says, “His heart went out to them.” They had gone out of their way to find him when he wanted solitude. He was grieving for the loss of his cousin, John the Baptist. But his soul was stirred beyond his bereavement by the hunger in their eyes. They were craving for a word of grace in the realm of politics as usual. They were thirsty in a desert of social antipathy. The most powerful empire on the face of ancient history did not feed them, both literally and metaphorically. Their stomachs were empty and their souls were malnourished. Some were diseased or wounded. Jesus saw their pain and his first response was compassion. Something quickened in the pit of his stomach. Tears washed his eyes.

His heart opened to receive them like a black mammy's arms swoop up her children and bring them to her bosom.

Now lest you think that was a politically incorrect thing to say or perhaps even "racist," let me tell you about Miss Maggie. Maggie was the head of the kitchen of the United Methodist Youth Camp where I spent most of the summers of my high school and college years. She was a huge woman who sweat profusely in the heat of a Florida summer with ovens burning in the kitchen. Maggie was always mopping her brow as she stirred pots and checked the casseroles in the oven. Some weeks she cooked for six or seven hundred campers plus staff. She was a woman of very modest income but she always drove a large Cadillac. Maggie also put her children through college. She was one of the most respected women in that small Southern town but she did not suffer fools. The kitchen staff loved her because she was firm but always fair. She cared for them beyond their employment.

After the lunch dishes were washed and dried the kitchen staff would rest in the screened in porch behind the kitchen, shaded by large magnolia trees. They drank sweet tea from mason jars while they fanned themselves with those funeral home fans that had a picture of the last supper on one side. It would not be unusual to find one of our college aged camp counselors sitting among them. They often smuggled their way into this black company of cooks and dishwashers because they felt lonely, or heart broken, or troubled about their futures. Miss Maggie would rock back and forth in a large white wicker rocker, fanning herself, listening, cooing, and sometimes even laughing. You would hear her say something like, "Lord, child, you can't be thinking like that." Or, "Now you listen to Miss Maggie..." Scolding was always a possibility.

But the kids just kept coming back. Why? Miss Maggie loved them without being sentimental. She was straightforward and told them the truth. She did not much care for whining and expected you to pick yourself up by your bootstraps. Maggie's love was real and as common as you and me. It was as deep as the bright light that shined out of her dark brown eyes.

The last time I saw her she was in the kitchen. She looked up and came from around the stove. Maggie wiped the sweat off her face. Her eyes twinkled and a huge smile spread across her face. "Why Mista Gay-ry," she beamed. "Just look at you. You a buck now." And she laughed and clapped her hands. I never felt so proud to be a man. And there has never been a human being I have been so fortunate to know than Miss Maggie Brown.

That's the kind of Jesus love I am talking about. Or think of this poem by the Japanese Zen poet, Ryokan:

If these sleeves
Of my black robes
Were only wider
I'd shelter all the people
In this up-and-down world¹

That is the kind of love that the world is desperate to feel and know that it is as real as anything in this life can ever be. Jesus looked over this huge crowd of people and his heart went out to them. He spoke to them and healed some. And then he said a very simple thing to his disciples as we move into the second movement of his story.

The disciples were conscious that it was getting late. They were undoubtedly hungry. They probably needed a little down time themselves. Imagine trying to take

¹ Ryokan, #1031, *Ryokan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 50.

care of a crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children. Seating was an issue, not to mention crying babies, lost children, and keeping the port-a-potties cleaned and stocked. The disciples were ready to take a break and eat supper. They suggested to Jesus that it was getting late and he should send them packing off to town where they could shop for their meal in local delis and restaurants. It would be a great boon to the local economy.

But Jesus said, “Give them something to eat yourselves.” Just feed them. They probably looked at him like he had lost his mind. They inventoried their chuck wagon and found only five loaves and two fishes. “We can’t possibly feed all these people with so little food,” they protested. “Shouldn’t we take care of our own first?” they demanded.

“Just give them what you have,” Jesus said. Share with them.

What could be more simple? What could be more demanding of us? Jesus did not propose a government solution to the problem of feeding the hungry. Nor did he suggest some kind of faith-based initiative. Jesus did not call for a Senate hearing, or Pew Charitable Trust survey, or an argument about debt ceilings, entitlements, or corporate tax write-offs. Jesus just said, “Give them something to eat.”

Jesus made no prediction that the food would get any further than the first dozen of the 5,000 men. There was no promise or expectation that there would be leftovers. If they ran out of food, then so be it. If, in fact, they had to go to town to buy more food, let it be so. If they don’t have enough money just buy what you can and feed those that you can. He did not promise breakfast for the next morning. All he said was that in this place, at this time, give them something to eat.

I think of John Wesley who also put it rather simply:

“Do all the good you can
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

Wichita is blessed with organizations like “The Lord’s Diner,” “The Kansas Food Bank,” and the United Methodist’s “Open Door.” And I know that there are lesser well-known and small kitchens that feed the hungry throughout the city. I know that many in this congregation make financial contributions to these and serve as volunteers. There are stories all over the country where a pair of sisters or a group of neighbors get together and start cooking something as simple as breakfast for poor people and their charity blossoms.

I can assure you that the need for food for low-income families will grow dramatically over the next several years. Part of the reason is because the base of poverty is expanding with a lack-luster unemployment rate across this nation. Another reason is because many of these families have seen their net worth diminish as they have resorted to spending whatever credit they could acquire to pay for everyday staples like food. Assets such as 401 K plans have been spent down. The silent reason is because we will see food such as wheat, corn, and soy squeezed into ever-smaller crops with climate change and burgeoning population. The cost of food will only get higher and the poor will suffer the most. So the challenge will be in front of us as far as the eye can see. As Christians the simple call of Jesus is “give them something to eat.” There will be no miracles of five loaves and two fishes. But Jesus

never said in this scene, “Expect a miracle.” He only said, “Give them something to eat.”

The third movement in this story is that of thanksgiving. Matthew tells us that Jesus took the five loaves and two fishes, held them up to heaven and gave thanks. He did not say, “I’m sorry, this is all we have to offer;” or “I wish we had jam to go with this bread.” He likely said something as simple as this Jewish prayer for bread: "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth."

I fear that thankfulness is one of the most neglected aspects of our emotional, spiritual, and social life. We tend to be thinking about what we would have rather received, how much more we should be given, and if the gifts that life has given us are as good as our neighbors’ gifts. We are more conscious of our insatiable appetites than we are of the abundance that is placed before us every day.

Yet in every religion that I know of gratitude is a value and expression shared by all. Grace and thanksgiving are inseparable. I wonder if deeply felt appreciation for simple things like food and friends is more a measure of faith than beliefs, tenets, and creeds.

Consider this Thanksgiving Prayer by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

For each new morning with its light
 For rest and shelter of the night,
 For health and food
 For love and friends,
 For everything Thy goodness sends.

Jesus gave thanks for the food that was before him. It did not seem like much.

It certainly did not seem like it would be enough. I have often had the experience that some of the most destitute people are the most willing to share and are the most thankful for whatever provision is placed before them. With compassion in his heart and the simple notion of feeding the people Jesus gave thanks.

The final movement of this story is the collection of leftovers. Twelve baskets of food were collected. The story does not tell us the powers that were at work or how this happened. The story does not say, “And God rained manna from heaven,” or “The hand of God was outstretched and the people were fed.” I certainly have no explanation, but one truth seems quite evident. Out of the simple act of sharing abundance was enjoyed by all. “Give them something to eat” was transformed in plenty for all. Consider this prayer, “Giver of all Good Gifts” by Dr. Walter Brueggemann:

You are the God who feeds and nourishes.
 You are the God who assures that we have more than enough,
 And we do not doubt that
 You satisfy the desire of every living thing.
 Even in such an assurance, however,
 We scramble for more food.
 After we have filled all our baskets with manna,
 We seek a surplus –
 Enough education to plan ahead,
 Enough power to protect our supply,
 Enough oil to assure that protection.
 And in the midst of that
 Comes your word,
 That we share bread and feed the hungry,
 Even to the least and so to you.

We mostly keep our bread for ourselves,
Our neighbors, and our friends.
It does not occur to us often,
To feed our enemies,
To share your bounty
With those who threaten us.
We do not often remember to break vicious cycles of hostility
By free bread,
By free water,
By free wine,
By free milk,
Until we remember that you are the giver of all good gifts,
Ours to enjoy,
Ours to share.
Stir us by your spirit beyond fearful accumulation
Toward outrageous generosity,
That giving bread to others
Makes for peace,
That giving drink to others
Makes for justice,
That giving and sharing opens the world
And assures abundance for all.²

Imagine the basketful of scraps that such outrageous generosity would reap for the world. The feeding of the 5,000 is not the story of the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, the Tea Party, or that of Independents or Libertarians, or communists or fascists, or nationalists or anarchists. It is our story, the story of the Christian Church, and the story of the Way of the Cross. In my mind it is the only story that will save a hungry world, in all the ways in which she hungers. ***FINIS***

² Walter Brueggemann, "Giver of All Good Gifts," *Prayers for a Privileged People* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 123-124.