

Feeding

Psalm 17:1-7, 15
Matthew 14:13-21

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."
Matthew 14:17b (NRSV)¹

This is the one miracle of Jesus, I believe – other than the Resurrection – that appears in *all four* Gospels... Suggesting, of course, the impact this ‘feeding’ of thousands – likely in a remote area of Galilee – had upon those who followed Jesus. In some ways the story describes ministry at its worst ...and at its best.

In fact, Matthew (in the following chapter) and Mark describe **two** feedings of hungry people numbering into the thousands...² These may be slightly different accounts of the same occurrence we find in this text.

I

What lessons may we draw from the ‘Feeding of 5,000’ + people by Jesus – the Bread of Life? **One lesson** – which speaks personally to me...perhaps also to you – is the contrast we see between the manner of Jesus...and that of the disciples... Did you *notice* the contrast?

The disciples here – at least as I hear them – are extremely **negative**...

“Send the crowds away...”³ ‘Send them *back to Mexico!*’

They didn’t want to be *responsible* for providing ‘chow’ for thousands of men, women and children.

(And, of course, who can much *blame* them!)

They stand in contrast to you...in some ways.

I have had the pleasure of serving some great congregations in my tenure as a pastor...many of them feeding some large crowds that gather...especially for funerals and other big occasions.

They would feed people – these churches – with as much Christian grace and care as God would hope for us to have.

They were – what one pastor-friend of mine once called... “A *Feeder Church*”...knowing how to welcome and feed hungry people, at the table of grace! The Church here at *Second Petersburg* is the same way.

Yet, feeding the throng...whether it’s several thousand...or several hundred...is *hard work*! Isn’t it?

And **the disciples** here want none of it! They even come and say to Jesus...

“Look... This is a deserted place... Not a *McDonalds* or a *Wendy’s* in sight! Send the crowds away...so that they may go and buy food for themselves!”

In other words...the actions and attitude of the 12 disciples – hand-picked to serve and learn by the Lord of Life – is to **send the people away**. *Flunk!* It’s ministry at its **worst!**

There’s the *first lesson* for us... Are we the sort of disciples content with **sending people away**... when the ‘business’ of ministry no longer *suits us* – or *inconveniences* us? What sort of disciple are **you**? *What sort of Church is **Second Presbyterian**?*

II

Jesus, you will notice, *counters* the negative attitude – or even the weariness of the Twelve – with a charge and a challenge to those who are close to him...

“They need not go away;
You give them something to eat.”⁴

Yes **you!**

While the disciples – and we might well read our own name among that number – are dismissing the crowds...Jesus counters with a charge to us...

Not only to keep the crowd intact...

But to **feed** the crowd as well.

There’s also another lesson for us, I believe, in this little exchange...between the Bread of Life – Jesus – and those (then and now) who struggle to be faithful...

The disciples, rather obviously, are **not** convinced – even by Jesus himself – that they have the *where-with-all* to feed thousands of hungry people in the waning hours of that day.

“Jesus, Man, **face facts!** We have *nothing* to give them...
Two *Whoppers*, with a few side orders of *fries*...
Not exactly a ‘happy meal!’”

And I suspect that you might want to side with the Twelve when you hear me say...

They just didn’t *get it!*

Sure, I know that’s easy for me to say some 2000 years later – (with the benefit of knowing the *ending and outcome* of the story)... A story that continues to play-out in the church even now!

You just watch!

But the disciples didn’t get it then... Just as **we** disciples often fail to *get it* now.

What did they – and we – fail to see? The *possibility of ministry* from and through a benevolent, compassionate God... That’s what we often fail to see and remember!

Some – like **Matthew** – involved in *accounting*...

Others – like the **fishermen** of Galilee – who made their lives in food harvest and *production*...

They could only manage to see the *limited resources* before them...
5 loaves and 2 fish...

They forgot...as we, too, so often forget...that when it comes to following Jesus...they – and we – worship and serve with One who is the Lord of **all** Creation.

He’ll underscore that very fact a bit later that night – by the way – when Jesus approaches them on the Sea!⁵

Jesus – then and now – counters any such talk of negativism and turning people away – in the company of the faithful.

“Bring them here to me.”⁶

Apparently, of course, Jesus is talking about the small lunch offering the disciples had before them.

As Wilda Chappell, a wise ruling elder – and mother of four daughters – once pointed out to me about **this** story... She could just hear that youngster – who happened to have brought *the loaves and fish with him* on that day with Jesus – *earlier* protesting to his good mama at home...

“Aw Ma! I’ll be the **only one there** who brings his lunch!”

“Bring them here to me.”

I wonder...when Jesus says this...could he also be speaking more *broadly*? I mean... Could he *also* be thinking of the crowds of people themselves?

“Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” he once said in this gospel, “and I will give you rest.”⁷

Maybe...and I’m only guessing...in the midst of his own sadness over the recent death of John – who *baptized* him... **Maybe**, in the depths of the compassion he felt for the people...huddling about him in an otherwise deserted place...

Maybe – I suspect *probably* – Jesus knew he could give the people what they cannot get for themselves... *Could not get* from skeptical, pragmatic disciples (who were trying to send them away)... *Cannot get* from the likes of you and me – when we, too, shut-out the very people whom Jesus came to love and save and care for...

“Bring them here to me.”

‘I... I *alone*, will give the people what they most desperately need.’

III

When he walked into a city church, serving breakfast to the homeless one morning, Will Willimon was surprised at one of the men he saw. This inner city church served breakfast to 150 people each day...helped largely by Christians who came there from *other* churches in the area.

Yet this minister and bishop saw a volunteer in the kitchen that caught his eye... the man was from one of the city’s most affluent congregations. It seemed remarkable that a man like him – from a church like his – would be there washing dirty dishes of homeless people.

So Willimon tried to engage the man in conversation.

“*I think it’s great* that you’re here,” the preacher said.

“I’m glad you think it’s great,” the man mumbled, as he worked.

“*I’m curious...have you always* enjoyed ministry to the homeless?”

“Who said that I *enjoyed* this?” he replied. “Frankly, I mostly can’t stand the homeless people that I’ve met here.”

“*Really?*” said the pastor.

“Have you sat down and talked with our guests here?” asked the man. “A lot of them are homeless for a reason... Some of them are half crazy.”

“Well, I guess that makes it all the more remarkable,” said Willimon, “here, washing dishes for the homeless. Why **are** you here?”

The man looked-up from his work, and said to the preacher with a tone of exasperation in his voice... “Why?”

“Because, *Jesus put me here*. That’s why.” Then he continued in his work.

It’s a **heck of a way** to get the job done (says Willimon)
but it’s uniquely *Jesus’ way*.⁸

Jesus “took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples.”⁹

And do you know what the best part is? *The people...given bread and fish through the hands of the disciples...blessed from the hands that had prepared it... These people would eat their fill...and be satisfied.* That’s ministry at its best!

Will **you** be satisfied...with what Jesus gives...and later commissions...through the hands of his disciples?

Come to the Table. **All** are invited!

W. Clay Macaulay
Director of Alumni Development
Union Presbyterian Seminary
Richmond - Charlotte

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² See Mark 8:1-10 and Matthew 15:32-39 – commonly known as the ‘Feeding of the 4,000.’

³ Matthew 14: 15b, **The New Oxford Annotated Bible** – *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 22 NT.

⁴ Matthew 16b, boldface and italic emphasis mine.

⁵ See Matthew 14:22-33.

⁶ Matthew 14:18b.

⁷ Matthew 11:28.

⁸ William H. Willimon, “*You Give Them Something to Eat*,” **Pulpit Resource**, Vol. 42, No. 3, Year A (July, August, September 2014), pp. 22-23.

⁹ Matthew 14:19b, **Common English Bible** - CEB - *a fresh translation to touch the heart and mind* (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2011), p. 16, New Testament.