

YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

When [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." 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. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

Matthew 14: 14-20

This is one of the stories that appears in all four gospels with only minor variation between them. Which means that the story was probably well-known even before it was written down, passed around, and shared among those early Christian communities. And those who were reading it or hearing it read for the first time no doubt would have recognized the roots of this episode in other biblical accounts.

The Bible is full of stories of God's abundance. Or it may be more accurate to say that the Bible is the story of God's abundance. Stories like this have been told, in form or another, throughout the history of Israel. In one sense it is the original story, going back to the creation story which celebrates the abundance and fruitfulness of creation. Those who heard the story of feeding of the multitude would have heard echoes of a story in the Book of Exodus, when the Israelites were fed with bread in the wilderness, in the form of manna.

If you read the story carefully you will also recognize similarities to the last meal that Jesus shared with the disciples in the upper room, where he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, giving us the form and imagery and meaning of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as we observe it now.

Told in different ways in a variety of contexts, the purpose of these stories remains the same—to help us see the world as a world of abundance rather than scarcity. It reminds us that God's intent for the world is for all to have enough. But when we look around our world and even our own communities, we have to wonder what has gone wrong with this dream of abundance, of enough for everyone. And often, when we get overwhelmed by all the hunger and poverty, the violence and injustices in the world, we are tempted to ask why God doesn't do something about it. So, in that regard, we are a lot like the disciples who were with Jesus that day beside the sea.

Now I like stories with a bit of dramatic tension in them. So, when I think about this episode, I like to imagine a scene that Matthew left out.

The disciples have accurately sized up their situation. They are faced with an overwhelming ministry challenge—feeding an enormous crowd of followers. And they are facing it with woefully *under*-whelming material resources. Their first response, of course, is to defer the problem to someone else—send them away and let them fend for themselves, or hope that someone better-equipped will deal with their needs. But that doesn't quite fit the model of ministry they have been observing in Jesus.

And this is where my imagination kicks in. I like to think that something happens between the time when Jesus says, "They need not go away," and what he says next. I like to

imagine an awkward silence, some nervous glancing around, some toe-shuffling. And then I imagine them turning to Jesus with a look that says, “So, what are you going to do now? Don’t you have a miracle up your sleeve that will resolve this dilemma and send everyone away happy?” And what is important for us to notice is what *doesn’t* happen here. Jesus does not sigh and say, “Alright, let me handle this. I’ll just perform a little sleight of hand, a little hocus-pocus, and turn these two perch and five bagels into an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

Before anything remarkable or miraculous happens in this story, Jesus simply says to them, “*You* give them something to eat.” *You*. And when he tells them “You give them something to eat,” he signals, first of all, that this is not a solo act. The task they are facing doesn’t depend on a single miracle-worker, or a single leader—it is a *shared* ministry.

And so he tells them to take whatever resources they have available, offer them to God’s work, ask God’s blessing on them, and then go about doing what they have seen him do and what they are called to do—showing the same compassion as Christ, sharing whatever gifts they have to offer, meeting the needs of the people around them. The disciples are not just passive observers of a miraculous action by Jesus. They become active participants in the kind of ministry they have been learning and practicing since the day they were called.

For the past few weeks now, we have been reading the gospel of Matthew through the lens of Matthew 25. Or rather, we have been noticing how the central themes of Matthew 25 reverberate throughout the gospel. How God calls the church to be present in the world—feeding those who are hungry, caring for those who are sick or weak, sheltering those who are homeless, comforting those who grieve losses, welcoming and providing for the strangers, the refugees, and all those who have not found a welcome in their own communities. In general, walking alongside our neighbors in whatever struggle or grief they endure, helping to lift whatever burden they carry.

And we noticed a few weeks ago that what we see in the gospel goes beyond occasional, individual acts of charity. Those are, of course a necessary part of living out the gospel, but the Matthew 25 invitation is about the church collectively acting on what are shown in the gospel to change the policies and structures and conditions that perpetuate poverty and racism across generations.

The Matthew 25 Invitation is a reminder that whenever we see these conditions and ask why doesn’t God do something about it, we hear this directive to the disciples—“You give them something to eat.” It is a reminder that God *has* done something about it. God sent Jesus into the world. And by extension, as the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ, God now sends us into the world to do something about it. Not only “you” individually, but “you” the church give them something to eat. You become the bread, that is blessed, broken, and given away to feed the hunger of the world. And not just the physical hunger, but the hunger for human dignity and justice, the hunger for friendship and acceptance, the hunger for adequate health care and decent homes, the hunger for community and for a sense of well-being.

Jesus doesn’t let the scarcity of the disciples’ resources define their ministry. Using whatever means and resources they have, they focus on their primary mission—sharing good news, feeding hungry people, being a good neighbor, building a welcoming, sustaining community. Wherever they see a need, they hear a call, and then they act on it with compassion and in faith, with whatever means they have at hand. And, again, we have to remember that when the disciples started handing out pieces of bread and fish, which Jesus had blessed and broken, when they set about what seemed like a futile attempt at feeding such a

large crowd with woefully inadequate resources, they had no idea how it was going to turn out in the end. It is only after they acted in faith that they begin to realize how what seems like a liability, a scarce resource, actually becomes an asset, an abundance, once you start giving it away. And so this story of the feeding of the crowds also carries a promise—a promise that goes back to that initial blessing of abundance and the intention of God. It is a promise that there will always be enough. But with that promise on God’s part comes a responsibility on our part—the discipline of good stewardship of the abundant resources God has provided.

I mentioned last week a tendency we have, particularly in mainline churches like our own, to look at ourselves in the mirror and only see the declining membership numbers, the aging of our congregations, and the shrinking of our annual budgets. We see our deficiencies and our limits. Our biggest challenge is to not let what we see as scarcity define our ministry. Our challenge is to keep our focus on our primary mission as a church. Our challenge is to hear the words of Jesus to his disciples—“You give them something to eat”—and to continue to use whatever means and resources we have available to be the church we are called to be. Our challenge this year and next year and in the coming years is to make the best use of all of our resources as we continue to pursue our mission. And one of the most valuable resources we have is *you*. The future of our church depends on your active engagement and presence.

The extent to which we become a church that reflects the calling and the values of Matthew 25 depends to a large degree on whether you will hear this call to engage the community, to address chronic issues like poverty and racism—whether you hear this as a call to you to be involved in the ministry of this congregation.

You give them something to eat. You invest your own resources in the future of this congregation so that the church can invest in the future of this community.

You continue to gather as the body of Christ. You continue to grow in faith, hope, and love. And then, you go out in Christ’s name to minister to our neighbors.

And if each one of us takes up that challenge, if we gather whatever resources we have available, if we step out in faith, we may be surprised at how God will use those resources to accomplish what God intends for Mason City and for the world.

May it be so.

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