

Matthew 14:13–21

13 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.

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We haven't had potlucks very much at all here since I started as minister. It's not that we haven't had shared meals together, but we haven't asked everyone to bring something. I think there were several reasons for this. At the time I started we had a larger number of older single people on fairly strict budgets, and there might have been a concern they would feel obligated to bring something that would hurt their budget. I also think there may have been a concern that some of the food would be unsafe to eat, not being cooked enough, or not kept at a safe temperature.

At my home church there was an older doctor who absolutely refused to partake in potlucks. He believed that potlucks were a disaster waiting to happen and would give you food poisoning. He wasn't going to risk it (I'm guessing he saw it happen in his own past or saw a bunch of patients that got sick from potlucks).

Despite the concerns about food safety at potlucks, I think they still give us an example of abundance. I cannot recall a potluck I've attended where there wasn't enough food. I may not have gotten that one special dish that I was looking forward to, but there has always been enough to eat. It's a lot like the story I just used for the children's sermon. There is abundance available, but we have to recognize it and work to share it.

Today's scripture about the feeding of the five thousand is found in all four gospels. Some of the details are different, but it's there in all of them. In Matthew, this story happens after Jesus and the disciples find out that John the Baptist was killed. Jesus wants to get away for a bit, probably to grieve with his disciples, but the people of that area follow him, even though he goes by boat they follow him along the shore on foot. There must have been some serious dedication and need in those people's hearts.

This story sets forth the pinnacle of the gospel message, and it probably was a huge source of hope and inspiration for early Christians, especially those who were trying to be faithful in times of persecution. I think it can inspire us with some good instruction today as well.

The first thing that this story teaches us is that God is love. Despite everything that Jesus and his disciples might be feeling, he has compassion for the people in the crowd that followed him. In fact, compassion is pretty much always Jesus's prime motivation; even when it goes against the rules that society made. He heals the sick, even on the Sabbath. He gives sight to the

blind; he helps the poor and downtrodden, no matter their place in society. Jesus's compassion isn't an abstract concept. It's not "Oh, that's terrible that you are suffering, I'll keep you in my thoughts and prayers." It's a compassion that cares deeply about people's basic needs, and then does something about it.

In this story, Jesus's concern is that this large crowd of people didn't have food and they were in the wilderness. There weren't towns nearby and there wasn't delivery back then. Jesus mirrors God's compassion and love for the people, no matter who they are. God, who is the ultimate power in the universe, intends peace in the world, an end to hunger, good health for everyone, and spiritual wholeness for all people.

We may not see miracles like Jesus did back then in today's world, or I should say that we don't see the miracles as miracles today, but God is still working for the peace, health, and well-being of all people; it's just done differently. Jesus doesn't go around healing people, but as an example; doctors, and scientists are constantly working to make things better. Our life expectancy and quality of life are significantly better than they were in Jesus's time. Antibiotics alone are a huge benefit to the world. All the surgeries, transplants, drugs, and other medical technology are just as much God's work in the world as Jesus laying hands and curing leprosy.

This leads me to my second point about this scripture today. This scripture teaches us about being disciples. It shows us that we have a responsibility to manifest God's love in the world when we claim to be Christians. Jesus didn't feed the five thousand; his disciples did. God has entrusted us to be the body of Christ, to be his hands and feet. God does not work alone. God works through people; people like you and me. The picture on the screen sums this idea up really well. Jesus is on a park bench with a man and the guy says, "So why do you allow things like famine, war, suffering, disease, crime, homelessness, despair etc. in the world?" and Jesus responds, "Interesting that you bring that up; I was about to ask you the same question."

And that brings me to the third point about this text. When we need it most, God will give us the power to work for good in the world. Sometimes we have the power to fix things already in our hands, we just have to believe it's possible.

There is a story about Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology and a popular speaker. He was once invited to a women's conference where he was to give a major address. These women were being challenged to raise several thousand dollars for a mission project goal.

While Campolo was sitting on the dais, the chairperson turned to him and asked him if he would pray for God's blessing as they considered their individual responses to the goal. Campolo stood and to the utter amazement of everyone present graciously said "no." He approached the microphone and said, "You already have all the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room. It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when in fact God has already blessed you with the abundance and the means to achieve this goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible and accountable stewards that we're called to be as Christian disciples." And he was right; they collected more than the amount for their goal.

Sometimes things look too big for us to do anything about. The disciples probably felt that way when they saw that the day was getting on and thousands of people were with them in the middle of nowhere. Maybe they felt they had enough or could scavenge enough food for themselves (maybe by doing a bit of fishing as well), but it looked like there was no way they could feed everyone that way. Rather than even try to feed over five thousand people I'm sure it

looked like a much easier solution to send them away. If it had been ten people it might have been considered doable, but over five thousand?

We run into this a lot today. The problems seem just too big to handle. When we were having our contemporary issues class after church, we would discuss a current event or issue. Usually at the end of the session someone would ask, "What can we do about it?" When you're talking about world hunger, fascism, war, human trafficking, racism and so many other things the answer tended to be, "I don't know." "maybe donate some money to a reputable organization?" or, "call our political representatives." The issues seemed so big that it seemed like it would overwhelm the whole denomination, let alone an individual. We may feel overwhelmed, but God is not calling us to just sit there in despair, God says, "figure it out, and get started. I'll help along the way."

That's exactly what Jesus does. Instead of agreeing with the disciples and sending everyone away to fend for themselves, Jesus says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." So, at least the disciples make an attempt. They scrounge around and find five loaves (probably the size of a large roll) and two fish. Jesus blesses the food, in much the same way as he teaches us to bless the eucharist (In fact it is believed that many early churches included this story in their communion traditions), and he has the disciples distribute the food. In the process a miracle happens and there is enough for everyone, plus a bunch of extra food.

Some have claimed that it wasn't a miracle. They claim that people may very well have brought supplies to eat, and as the disciples passed out their meager bounty the crowd added what they brought to it. Even if that is true, is that not a miracle as well? Isn't that what God is asking us to do; to work together to help each other, especially supporting those who are the most in need?

As one commentator points out, "This is not the only time that disciples have discovered the power of the Holy Spirit to do great things when Christians join together in unity and faithfulness to God's good purposes for the world. The promise of the story of the feeding of the five thousand is that if we join together in unity and faithfulness, God will be with us. It's not a promise of the absence of struggle and pain - Jesus even had to go the way of the cross - but a promise that God will be with us and that God's intention for love, peace, and justice in the world will ultimately prevail."

God is love. God's love includes the desire for all people to be able to have the basic necessities; food, health, justice and opportunity. As Christians we are called to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. To make God's love a reality. The task may seem daunting, but with determination and help from the Holy Spirit we can make it happen. We just have to find a place to get started. Amen.