

Feeding the Hungry: Scarcity vs. Abundance

The Feeding of the 5000

Matthew 14:13-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For those of us who do not necessarily take the miracle stories in the Bible literally, it's nonetheless crucial that we not carelessly toss these stories out, or ignore them. Even the most progressive of biblical scholars and interpreters would agree that **just because something didn't actually happen doesn't mean it doesn't contain an element of truth.** In other words, **any story can point beyond itself to reveal a deeper spiritual meaning and practical reality.**

So instead of getting bogged down in a pointless debate over whether 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish actually fed 5000 men, plus women and children, (this is according to Matthew's version of this story, making the actual number over 15,000+ people), we can concentrate instead on the many themes presented in the text.

I want to focus this morning on just two of those themes, those truths to which this story points. The first theme is a focus on the issue of **compassion**. Through the words and actions of Jesus, the gospel writer hopes to impart an understanding of God that reveals the nature and character of **God as compassionate and concerned for our well-being – and not only our spiritual well-being, but also for our physical well-being.** That, in and of itself, is a very different picture from a God who sits on a far away throne acting like a stern judge just waiting to punish those who step out of line.

It is important to note, however, that Jesus had more than just the *feeling* of compassion for those in need. Compassion, in the biblical sense, leads Jesus to take the next step and put his concern for people in need into *action* by actually ministering to their needs. This leads to another important truth of this text.

What would you have done if you were one of Jesus' disciples faced with thousands of hungry people? Instead of approaching this situation as a ministry opportunity, the solution of the disciples was to simply send the crowd away so that they could feed themselves. When you and I find ourselves face to face with someone in need, isn't it often easier, and perhaps even our first gut reaction, to simply send him or her away – perhaps with a kind word, but not with the compassion that would lead us to take the action necessary to actually help alleviate their need? That's why Jesus' response is so profound. He says, **"They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat."** **This is a profound shift in responsibility!** But even then, the disciples' response was one of resignation, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." In this moment, **Jesus calls the disciples (and therefore us) to step up and reject the myth of scarcity.**

How often are we tempted (either as individuals or as a congregation) to believe that our own resources are too meager and limited to do anyone much good? That's acting out of what is called **theology of scarcity**. As an example, and yes I realize this is a specific political criticism, which I try to avoid, that approach has been our governor's response to the recent immigrant/refugee children from Central America who are being held here in Oklahoma. We simply cannot, she claims, absorb 1500 children into our educational and health systems. (And don't get me started on our state's health care system, or lack thereof.)

But really, is our state that poor? Or, is it a factor of **not having the compassion to take action because of the political implications surrounding our admittedly problematic immigration policies?** Regardless of the final policy toward these children who have fled Central America, **counting the cost of compassion, in my opinion, is something that Jesus would have us seriously consider.**

Here at College Hill, located in the somewhat economically depressed neighborhood of Kendall Whittier, I continue to struggle with what to do for those who knock on our church door asking for help. I must admit, in all honesty, that **I do hear Jesus' words to me, "YOU give them something..." And I am reminded that for Jesus, compassion is always accompanied with action.**

Well, wouldn't you know, I had an opportunity to put that to the test just this past week. I got a phone call a week ago from someone I didn't know, but who knew about College Hill and our welcoming ministry. He said that a mother, who is diabetic and living on disability income, and her son (a 20-year old who suffers from a number of psychological and behavioral issues, including Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism), just moved from north Texas into a duplex a few blocks from the church.

They came here with only their luggage, presumably on a bus because they do not own a car. The person who called me was already able to track down a few bare necessities: a bed and sheets, some towels, a couch, a small old TV, and a TV tray. But they have no kitchenware of any kind, including dishes, silverware, pots or pans, a can opener, or even a table to eat on. I was asked to visit them and see what the church might do to help.

I must confess that it wasn't particularly easy for me to knock on their door. Even as a pastor, I found myself outside my own comfort zone. But I believed that visiting them is indeed what Jesus would do. After a nice visit, and an assessment of their very real needs, I, on behalf of you, the congregation, felt moved to come back to the church to put together a care package. With the help of Lisa Hays, our Office Administrator, it involved raiding our church kitchen for a cooking pot, a skillet, some utensils, a few plates, bowls, cups, a small fold out table for their kitchen, and a coffee maker from the small kitchen on the second floor that Lisa and I don't use anymore. Since it was raining that day, I included an umbrella from our lost and found. I also purchased a \$25 gift card from the Warehouse Market just up the street so they could buy some food and other necessities.

No, I didn't ask permission before I did this. As the saying goes, sometimes asking for forgiveness is easier than asking for permission. And, after all, we can easily replace any of those items. But I'm not sure they'll even be missed. **That's acting out of a theology of abundance – of sharing what we have!**

The woman and her son were absolutely thrilled with these basic necessities. But it didn't stop there. Lisa picked up several more items that evening, including a toaster, electric can opener, silverware set, toiletry articles, cleaning supplies, and a Wii

computer game system that her 10-year old son, Cody, donated because he doesn't use it any more and wanted to help. Talk about acting out of a theology of abundance!

You should have seen the look of deep appreciation and sheer joy on this woman's face, accompanied by a grateful hug. Her son was blown away by the gift of the gaming system.

This situation was a clear reminder to me of why College Hill is in ministry. And it put into practice Jesus' command, "You give them something..." Perhaps the lesson for Jesus' disciples, and therefore for the church, is that **God is not only compassionate but also abundantly able to provide. But God does that through us – through our own acts of compassion, which include the sharing of our blessings with others.**

Again, **that means a change in focus from a practice of a 'theology of scarcity' to a 'theology of abundance.'** A theology of abundance is accentuated in this biblical story with the observation that even after everyone ate their fill, there were still leftovers. It recognizes that **with our limited resources, God can use even the little we have to minister in powerful ways to others.** I only wish our politicians could put politics aside long enough to realize this.

So, perhaps the word to each of us, as individuals and as a congregation, is "You give them something..." This is how we feed the hungry.

Amen.