

'Feeding' the Multitude: Our Response *The Feeding of the 5000*

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

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In our August church newsletter, emailed just last Thursday, my article reflected on the question, "**What is progressive Christianity?**" That something we reflect on all the time. After mentioning that there is no one definition, I referred to the bullet point list found in our church brochure. The first two of seven points are particularly applicable and in play with today's Gospel Reading, Matthew's version of the story known as the Feeding of the 5000.

Point one describes progressive Christianity: Willingness to question tradition, including orthodox understandings of church doctrine and biblical interpretation. Second point: Respect of intellectual integrity, including the use of the latest in biblical and scientific knowledge and understanding. These two points alone provide guidance for **those who cannot accept the miracle stories in the Bible on a literal level.** That includes many, if not most, here at College Hill.

Progressive Christianity, however, does not give us permission to dismiss those stories outright, 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 elements 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 today on how this familiar story can help inform and shape our own response to those in need. I'll do so, uncharacteristically of me, in three lessons. In fact, this may be my first attempt at the age-old method of a 3-point sermon plus illustrations.

Notice how the story begins. After just learning about the violent beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus "withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself" (Matt. 14:13). Who among us, in times of deep sorrow and grief, haven't wanted to simply withdraw and go away by ourselves for a while? But Jesus won't be allowed by sit with his loss. When the crowds learned of Jesus' departure they followed him on foot along the shore. Since they won't leave him alone, what does Jesus do? He went ashore to engage the crowd. Why? Because "he had compassion for them" (v. 14). I'm not too sure that many of us wouldn't have just kept sailing away. Jill Duffield, editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, provides a very helpful commentary on this passage. She writes:

In stark contrast to our usual human response: Rather than resent their intrusion or grow frustrated with their unwillingness to give him even a brief respite, Jesus has compassion for them. Even in Jesus' own depleted state, he sees their need, their desperation, their loss and grief, and he has compassion. Perhaps in his own pain he acutely feels the pain of all of those surrounding him.

It is important to note, therefore, Jesus had more than just the *feeling* of compassion for those in need. Compassion, in the biblical sense (literally meaning *to suffer with*) leads to the next step by putting concern for people in need into *action* by actually ministering to their needs. Duffield suggests that this lesson one for those of us who call ourselves followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus.

"When we are faced with the mind-boggling hurts of humanity, our deepest griefs, heaviest burdens and greatest fears should not move us to self-protection, but instead open our hearts to the pain of creation. Don't look away or run away, go ashore and into the chaos, armed with vulnerability and compassion." And, "Sometimes even we leverage our hurts for the good of others, our desolation the impetus for providing consolation. That may well be the work of the Spirit." I am reminded of something I learned in seminary in preparation to be a pastor. Interruptions to your daily plans and schedules aren't a distraction from your ministry, they *are* your ministry.

Lesson One: Don't withdraw, go ashore. How can we apply this mantra to our church life? How can you apply it in your life?

Next, when it becomes late after a day of healing ministry, the disciples come to Jesus and offered a *practical* solution to the predicament they were facing. "Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (v. 15). We would have probably come up with the same practical solution. It's certainly the easiest way out of the predicament – send people away to fend for themselves. As Presbyterians, we know that being practical is our go-to plan of action. Duffield suggests, however, "Practical isn't always bad, but **practical can mask distancing ourselves from others while contending we are deeply invested.**" Ouch.

This is an increasingly common response when the poor and/or homeless knock on church doors. It's easier, and indeed more practical, to simply tell those in need about calling 211, or to go knock on the church door down the street, or say there's really nothing we can do. This is something I face here at the church every week. It is then that I recall Jesus' words to the disciples in this story, "**You give them something.**" My current practice here at the church is to give a \$25 gift card from Warehouse Market, taken from our 'Pastoral Assistance' budget line item. You may recall that we doubled that from last year's budget to \$2,000. That can help a lot of people.

Yet again, we learn that Jesus' ways are different from our own. "When our urge is to send people away, Jesus commands we gather them in. Jesus said to the disciples, '**They need not go away; you give them something to eat.**'" (v. 16). **This is a profound shift in responsibility!** "Lesson number two for we Jesus people: When we, knowing people have a pressing and real need, have the urge to send them elsewhere to get it met, we should instead call them closer and meet it. Consider what this might mean in our congregations, cities or country. Just think about all the times we have capitulated to our urge to send people away. Now, consider that Jesus tells us to instead bring them closer."

Lesson Two: Don't send away, gather them closer. How can we apply this mantra to our church life? How can you apply it in your life?

Next, the disciples respond probably just as you and I would. How in the world can 12 of us feed this multitude of thousands? We simply don't have the resources. To prove their point they show Jesus all they've got combined: five loaves, two fish (v. 17). We often overlook Jesus' profound response, "Bring them here to me" (v.18). What happens next? "Commence miracle. Blessed, broken, distributed. Enough. No, more than enough. Baskets left over." This is by far the hardest lesson: handing over to Jesus our meager resources to be blessed, broken, and used in ways we cannot imagine. It's hard "because we don't want to let go of 'our' loaves and fish because we are hungry, too, and clearly there is not enough. And if we give it up, what will we eat?... Charity begins at home. And God helps those who help themselves. And...and...and..." But guess what, Jesus didn't say those things. Instead he states, "Bring them here to me." That's the heart of lesson three. The hardest lesson of all.

Duffield suggests, "We can leverage our pain to extend compassion and empathy. We can reach out to others even when we are sorely in need ourselves. We can sometimes move beyond practical and step out in faith, particularly for the short term, but handing over all we've got for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of needs that will not stop, that's tough. But that's what Jesus tells us to do."

All we have to do is watch the news if we want to see examples of hardship, need and tragedy all around us, locally and globally. There was a small tornado that touched down here in Tulsa just last night, causing much structural damage. "We are moved with compassion. We genuinely want to help. Lesson one and lesson two, complete. But then we step back and realize that it isn't practical to think that we can do much. 'Look, Jesus, all we have are a few loaves, a few fish, what are they among thousands and thousands of people?'"

That's our all-too-common response in acting out what's called a **theology of scarcity**. Yet this biblical story, among many others, calls us to respond out of a **theology of abundance – God's 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. "Jesus says, '**Bring me what you have.**' Can we complete lesson three and hand over to him our loaves, our fish, whatever we have that might bring relief, from **our voice to our vote to our advocacy to our dollars to our prayers?**

Lesson Three: Don't hold back, hand over to God. How can we apply this mantra to our church life? How can you apply it in your life?

This very day let's squelch our urge to send people away and instead call them closer. This very day let's gather whatever we happen to have and say, "Jesus, take it." Commence miracle.

Three lessons:

1. **Don't withdraw, go ashore.**
2. **Don't send away, gather them closer.**
3. **Don't hoard, hand over to God.**

Amen.