

**Stepping Forward to a Better Life:
Finding Plenty in the Midst of Scarcity
Matthew 14:13-21**

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For the past six weeks or so, our staff and a host of volunteers have been in the business of hosting conferences and conventions. Your new and newly renovated facilities are being put to good use. When you invite 800 or a 1,000 people to be your guests, the bigger question than where are we going to meet is the question of where are we going to eat? While we have contributed to the restaurant businesses of Brentwood this summer, we have also fed a host of people out of this facility. Eight hundred people joined us for lunch four days this past week. We served 1570 meals at the Tennessee Annual Conference and hosted two receptions that served over 500 people each. Yes, church folk can eat!

And food is the subject of the miracle that lies before us today. In this story, there are 5,000 men present to hear Jesus speak, not counting women and children, says Matthew. So, if you use modern trends of church attendance, there could have been, ministerially speaking, somewhere in the neighborhood of 20,000 people present on that Galilean hillside when Jesus fed the multitude. At least we know it was a large crowd and that Jesus had compassion on them. Come, let us take a closer look.

THE HUNGER IS REAL

As evening approached, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a remote place and it is already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

Every few hours I have a habit of saying, “I’m starving to death.” As I make that lament rummaging through the refrigerator I find Sandy to be extremely skeptical. She declares no emergency. She doesn’t run to the stove and prepare a meal. After 40 years, she knows I am just talking, not starving.

Statistics tell us that Americans eat 75 acres of pizza, 53 million hot dogs, 167 million eggs, 3 million gallons of ice cream, and 3,000 tons of candy a day. We have a love affair with food, and it’s showing. Fifty-five percent of American adults are overweight and 23 percent of us are obese, costing this country about 118 billion dollars in lost wages and medical expenses annually. On March 10 of 2004, the U.S. House of representatives passed a bill known as the “Cheeseburger Bill” designed to protect fast food companies from lawsuits filed by overweight people.

I was on a cruise ship this past May when I heard the man on the elevator beside me say to his wife, “I think I’m having a panic attack. I haven’t eaten for at least 15 minutes.” Most of us have no clue about hunger.

But our experience does not hold true for the majority of the world. One billion of the world’s richest people consume 80 percent of the earth’s resources. The other five billion make do on the other 20 percent. The world has 840 million chronically malnourished people, most of them women and children. Seven million children in the world under the age of five die each year from malnutrition. The Department of Agriculture in our own country, estimates there are 3.8 million families who experience hunger and up to 12 million families concerned about having enough food to feed their families. Hunger is real.

The disciples say send them away. Do we not offer similar suggestions? Let the government feed them, let social services take care of them, let the unemployment office help them, let the homeless shelters take them in. Meanwhile, the government is knocking on the door of faith-based communities

saying, “When are you going to help?” Leaping from the pages of scripture Jesus exclaims, “Do not send them away. Give them something to eat.”

THE SUPPLIES ARE LIMITED

“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” say the Disciples. John tells us that Andrew confiscated that from a kid and convinced him to share.

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard,
To fetch her poor dog a bone.
When she got there, the cupboard was bare,
And so the poor dog had none.

While that nursery rhyme was written as political satire, we often whine that the food is scarce. Who had all these kids in the first place? Who, in their right mind, would invite this many people to dinner? If we feed them now, they will be back tomorrow like stray animals.

Meanwhile, Jesus takes those five loaves and two fish, a poor boy’s lunch, and feeds a multitude. It may be the biggest pot luck spread in the history of the world. How did He do it? What is happening here?

Did the heavens open and bread fall down like manna in the wilderness? Did fish suddenly start jumping out of the lakes into the kettles so that they suddenly had a fish fry that would blow your mind?

Albert Schweitzer says we have a symbolic meal taking place here, maybe something like Holy Communion. If that is the case, it seems likely that some kid would have protested like the one to whom I served a thimble full of grape juice one Sunday only to hear him scream, “I want more juice, I want more juice!”

H.E. Paulus surmises that we have a lesson in unselfishness here. Maybe he is right. Would a multitude of people follow Jesus that far from home without

packing a lunch? Could it be that when Jesus and his disciples shared what little food they had, others were moved to share as well, until there was more than enough for everyone? Seems like a logical explanation to me.

Gary Gardner writes in an article entitled “Escaping Hunger – Escaping Excess”, misconceptions of hunger abound around the world. We tend to think of hunger as resulting from a desperate scarcity of food. However, even in nations like Africa and South Asia, where hunger is most severe, there is often plenty of food to go around. And even food-rich nations are home to many underfed people. The problem is not how much food is available, the problem is distribution.

In this country, food production has tripled since World War II while the population has only doubled, so why are there hungry people? The percent of personal income given to charity in the United States was 2.9 percent during the Great Depression and 2.5 percent in 2002. Is hunger a problem of production or a lack of faith?

THE PRAYER IS POWERFUL

Verse: 19 “Looking up to Heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Fred Craddock tells about a visit with his granddaughter, Kristen. “We take a walk in the woods,” says Fred. “We sit on a rock and watch the birds. We explore God’s creation. And when we come in for lunch, Kristen proceeds to offer the blessing. ‘God is gracious, God is good and we thank him for this food.’ But before she says ‘Amen,’ she gets out of her chair and comes over and says, ‘Granddad, we have to do it again. You didn’t hold your hands right. If you don’t hold your hands right, it won’t work.’ So she takes my hands and folds them just right. Then she climbs back into her chair and says the blessing again. ‘You know what?’ says Fred. ‘It worked.’ Kristen was grateful and I was grateful and we all said Amen.”

If you had been asked to give the blessing, what would you have said that day? “Dear Lord, where did all these people come from and what am I going to do for Christ’s sake? Amen.”

Jesus would have most likely said the Jewish grace that all men prayed: “Blessed art thou, Jehovah our God, King of the Universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth. Amen”

Do we pray to get out of a pickle or do we pray to glorify God? We do not pray with much passion until we are between a rock and a hard place. The rest of the time we do not think a lot about prayer. We don't pray for health until we get sick. We don't pray for help until we get in trouble. We don't pray for guidance until we are confused. I am not knocking the prayer of desperation. The Bible says to let our requests be known; to ask and we shall receive.

There is another dimension of prayer: prayer does not change things but changes us. Either we take the view that the world needs changing for our sakes or we can ask God to use the world to change us for his sake. We want the circumstances to change but God uses the circumstances to change us.

Why are we reluctant to pray? We cannot enter into deep communion with God and come out the same. Henri Nouwen says “To pray means to stop expecting from God the small mindedness we discover in ourselves.” Instead, prayer that will glorify God puts God right where he belongs, at the very center of our beings. Instead of ‘get me out of this mess,’ I pray ‘Glorify your name, Glorify your name in all the earth!’

THE LEFTOVERS ARE PLENTIFUL

Verse: 20 “They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.”

Thomas Chisholm put it this way:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God our Father.
There is no shadow of turning in thee,
All I have needed thy hand hath provided,
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

Our “little” combined with God’s “lot” becomes more than enough. Each of the disciples took home a basketful of leftovers.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside.

What more could anyone want?