

“Going Deep”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 6: 35-44

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story found in all four gospels. Consequently, it is by far one of the most familiar stories we know from the Bible. 5 loaves, 2 fish. The crowds sit in groups. Jesus blesses the food and the disciples hand it out. After all have been fed, twelve baskets of leftovers are gathered up. One miracle story completed. Move on to the next.

Have you ever experienced something like the feeding of the five thousand? Some of you have pretty big families, and I can imagine it likely feels like five thousand when you have to prepare food for a family gathering! For many of us, we have not witnessed something as miraculous as five loaves of bread and two fish feeding over five thousand men, women, and children. But if I asked each of you, you could probably name one or two times where you’ve seen something near-miraculous take place with the stretching of limited resources to meet the needs of many.

In fact, there have some occasions at church when it’s felt like we’ve fed 5,000 with very little. Or, maybe a better way to phrase that is we didn’t know how many to expect for a meal, so we went on faith that there would be enough food. I think of VBS dinners, pitch-ins after worship, the Community Picnic. Shoot - even today, we didn’t know how many to expect for worship and the lunch afterwards. We just trusted that what we brought will provide. Funny - that seems to be how it always works out, too.

I think I’ve told this story before, but one particular instance I’ve had that felt like the feeding of the five thousand was when Debbie and I were in seminary 22 years ago. In January of 1996, there was a tremendous snowstorm which hit the East Coast. It was the first weekend of January, and many students had returned to campus, because final exams began on Tuesday. Saturday night, it started snowing, and it didn’t stop coming down until Monday morning. In the end, 28 inches of snow lay on the ground in Princeton, New Jersey. The governor declared a state of emergency and all the roads were closed for 48 hours. And thankfully, our final exams were postponed for a day!

But the “miracle” occurred on Sunday afternoon and evening. The dining hall usually only served meals on Sunday morning and noon, with students responsible for their meals on Sunday evening. As the snow began to pile up, it became clear no one was going to be able to leave campus to get something to eat that night. And where usually the

Sunday lunch crowd would be smaller during the rest of the school year due to students going out to lunch after church, almost everyone on campus descended on the dining hall at 12:00 noon for their meal.

The only problem was there was very little food for that many people. The delivery truck, which was supposed to have come on Friday, would not show up until the next day. The only people present in the kitchen were a cook and an assistant. The line of students was long, and it was unclear how they would feed so many with so little. But somehow they managed, pulling things out of the freezers and refrigerators and cupboards and pantries. And then dinner came. Usually, the dining hall didn't serve an evening meal on Sunday. But no one could go anywhere to get food, since the roads were closed. The food service director drove in - illegally - and opened up for dinner. Like a hungry flock of pigeons in a park, we all swarmed in once we heard the word that dinner was being served. Between the three of those men and some help from fellow students, on a cold and snowy night the masses were fed with very little to start with. It was a day none of us would forget.

In that situation, the first thing we may notice is how everyone was fed. People's physical hunger was met by the actions and resources of a few. On the surface, that appears to be the common link with this morning's passage from the gospel of Mark. However, as the individual who lived through that experience, the connection I draw between it and Jesus' action is not that of feeding the hungry, but rather of showing compassion. The dining hall staff could have said to all the students on that snowy Sunday night, "We're sorry, but we can't help you. We have to figure out how we are going to take care of ourselves." But in that situation, the response instead was: "How can we solve this problem, and meet these people's needs?" Compassion was shown to many, despite the difficult situation.

Jesus could have very easily chosen another response to the crowds who kept following him at the beginning of our passage. Two weeks ago, Ann Hamel preached about the death of John the Baptist - which occurs immediately before this miracle. The disciples had gone to retrieve John's body to give him a proper burial. That is where they have come from when they come to Jesus and tell him "all that they had done and taught." They had had a rough time of it over the past several days, and were exhausted, "for they had no leisure even to eat." Last Sunday, we talked about Jesus recognizing the weariness of his disciples, and encouraging them to rest. He seeks to be their pastor and friend, saying to them: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They sought peace and isolation, a chance to recharge their batteries, and contemplate the events of the past few weeks.

But, as we noted last week, all they kept running into were people, people, people. They walked away from the towns and villages, and the people followed them. They got into a boat and went away from the shore, and the people followed them. They landed on the opposite side of the lake, and the people were waiting there for them.

And then comes the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples were undoubtedly tired and hungry themselves, and ask Jesus to send the people away so they might get something to eat before dark. Instead of sending them away, Jesus tells them, "You give them something to eat." My guess is that it was the disciples with the A-type personalities who were quoted as saying: "It would take 200 denarii worth of bread to feed all these people. How can we realistically do such a thing?" All they could think of was the logistics of going into town, buying food at such a late hour, getting it back, distributing it, worrying about health codes and portion sizes, and so on.

But instead of logistics, Jesus thinks - and believes - on another level than the disciples. "What do you have? Go and see." They bring back five loaves and two fish. After organizing the people in their small groups, Jesus blesses the food and distributes it through the crowd. There was plenty left over. Instead of questioning how to get enough for all those people, Jesus takes what they have and makes it more than enough for their need.

We get a lot of folks who come by the church asking for assistance. Utility bills, rent assistance, food, child care, and so on. One benefit of the New Beginnings Program that we've had for several years is that we have more funds available for those kinds of needs. But it's still overwhelming, many days, and I'll admit that I use the excuse too often that we simply have limited resources to help them out. And I know that too many times, we use the excuse that we as a church can't really do enough to make a difference in people's lives. We feel overwhelmed with the growing needs of our society, and feel helpless that we could never satisfy so many people. Too often, we are like the disciples, asking Jesus to shoo the crowds away so we can go rest and have some peace and quiet.

But let me ask you something: when do you think the miracle occurs in this story? Is it when the people sit down in their small groups, ready to receive their evening meal? Is it when Jesus looks up to heaven and blesses the bread and the fish? Is it as the food was distributed and the people ate the meal? In the Church of England, there is a moment in the celebration of the Lord's Supper when a bell is rung, signifying the moment when the bread and wine symbolically turns into the body and blood of Jesus. When does the little bell ring during the feeding of the five thousand, signifying the start of the miracle?

I would argue that the miracle happens way before any of that. It happens at the moment Jesus had compassion on the crowds of people and decided to put aside his own needs in order to meet their needs. I would insist that the miracle which takes place is not one of physical needs being met through bread and fish, but is one of spiritual needs being satisfied because he would not turn them away. I believe the lesson we are meant to learn from this miracle story is not how we look at a person's needs and determine we cannot help them because we have so little, but rather how we are to offer what we have, and allow God to use those resources in miraculous ways.

And in the example I shared earlier from my life, Tim Richards was the person who performed God's miracle in Princeton, New Jersey. Tim was the food service director, and made the decision to come in and feed the students in a time of great need. He wasn't a minister, teacher, or great leader in the church. He was a servant of God, and frankly, on that day, he taught me through his actions how we are to show compassion as children of God.

How might we go deep and show the compassion of God in small yet transformative ways? When a new student looks lonely and lost as the school year starts, maybe we invite her to sit with us at lunch, making her feel included and welcomed. When we witness someone struggling with their emotions, maybe we sit patiently with him, reassuring him through our calm presence. When we recognize that there is a disconnect between us and someone we care about, maybe we take the first step in opening up a conversation and seeking reconciliation. When we see a stranger having difficulty communicating with a staff member in the store, maybe we offer our assistance in bridging the gap. How is God calling you to go deep and show the compassion of God in your life today?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "It is not up to you to feed the whole crowd, to solve the whole problem, or to fix the whole world. It is up to you just to share what you have got, to feed whatever big or little hunger that happens to be standing right in front of you. The rest will come. Because God is God, the rest will come. For now, for your part, how many loaves have you got? Go and see" ("Local Miracles," Mixed Blessings, 102).

Know that God has gone deep in his love for you through Jesus Christ our Lord. May that love feed you where you are today, and help you feed others with the loaves and fishes you have in your hands.

Thanks be to God. Amen.