

Isaiah 55:1-3 Mark 6:30-44
Feeding the Hungry

This morning's reading from Mark tells the story of the feeding of the 5,000. This, for some, was Jesus' signature miracle. In fact, it's the only miracle that is told in all 4 gospels. That is significant. It's such a big deal, that after this feeding, John tells us that the people tried to take Jesus *by force* and make him king. Think about that. Jesus feeds people, and they want to make him president for life. A role he never wanted. Which is why, John tells us, that Jesus pulled a Houdini and escaped from the crowd. Quietly slipped away.

Setting up the story: After the events in the Gerasenes, where Jesus cleansed a man of a legion of demons, Jesus then heals a woman and a young girl (he crossed literal boundaries by going into Gentile territory, then he crossed taboo social boundaries by ministering to a woman and a child). He then sends his disciples out on a short-term mission trip so they can proclaim the Kingdom of God and practice their faith. While they're on that trip, they get word that John the Baptist has been killed, in a horrific way. This would have been distressing news to them. We pick up the story now, with the disciples returning from their mission trip.

Mark 6:30-44

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' ³⁷But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' ³⁸And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five loaves, and two fish.' ³⁹Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²And all ate and were filled; ⁴³and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

This is the word of the Lord.

As I mentioned, this miracle is the only one that appears in all 4 gospels.

And what's worthy of noting is that none of the gospel writers tell us of the mechanics of how this happened, or how Jesus did this. In our imaginations, we may wonder if the bread expanded, or if more loaves of bread and more fish appeared magically, or if the fish all of a sudden got larger (like when a fisherman

tells his story about his catch, and a 5-pound fish miraculously becomes a 25 pound fish by the time he's done with the story). We aren't given any details about the multiplication of bread and fish. The focus seems to be on the prayer of Jesus and his distribution to the disciples following the prayer (which, if you noticed, is almost word-for-word the same as what he says and does at the last supper), and on the disciples' willingness to follow what he told them to do, in spite of their skepticism. We're intrigued with "How did he do that?" but there is a more important aspect to this story.

Before I get to that, I don't want to miss Mark's important comment, that when Jesus saw the crowd, he had *compassion* for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. People were coming from here, there, and everywhere, like paparazzi, to find Jesus, and Jesus could've been annoyed. Like, "Hey people, we're trying to get some peace and quiet here; could you come back later? Or, I'll meet you back in town after our retreat." But he saw their need. He knew the reason why they went out of their way, to the desert no less, to flock to him. They were like sheep without a shepherd.

That line suggests that the people were hungry, not just for food, but for leadership in their lives. They wanted direction, and guidance. They were, so to speak, wandering. Does this speak to people we see today?

Think about how many people feel that way today, and are looking to attach themselves to someone or something that will give them meaning, and guidance. It's good to be reminded that Jesus sees them, right now, like he saw the people back then, with compassion. His heart goes out to them.

Notice that Jesus' compassion, at first, is for their *spiritual, emotional, directional* hunger, which leads him to *teach* them. "Many things" he taught them, as Mark says. Then, when it's late and the disciples want the people to go away, Jesus' compassion is for their *physical* hunger. This tells us that Jesus desires to meet *all* the human needs—the need for direction and guidance; and, the need simply to be fed. Jesus doesn't separate body and soul in a dualistic sort of way. His heart, his compassion, is for the whole person. That's a good reminder. He didn't come just to save souls and make sure they get to heaven. He came to help human beings flourish, and human beings flourish when they have good nourishment for their bodies as well as their souls. And that task, of feeding the hungry, has been entrusted to his followers.

Which brings us to the main point of this story, in the multiplying of bread and fish: Jesus gives his *disciples* the task of feeding the crowd. Jesus gives his *disciples* the task of feeding the crowd. Sometimes this story is told as "Jesus feeds the 5,000" but really, it's the story of the *disciples* feeding the 5,000.

Actually, it's both-and. It's a team effort. And perhaps that's the point. It isn't just what Jesus does, or what we do, but what Jesus' followers do, together, with Jesus.

Notice, when the disciples—who are probably hungry and grumpy themselves (hangry)—make a request to Jesus about sending people away so they can get something to eat, Jesus says to them, “*You* give them something to eat.” *You* feed them. Really? If I had been there, that would've elevated my grouchiness to a new level. It seemed to do that for the disciples, who give a snarky reply by saying there isn't enough here to feed the lot of them, or, there isn't enough money to buy food for them (depending on which gospel account you read). Either way, the disciples were not wrong about those facts. There *wasn't* enough bread or money to feed a crowd that is equivalent to the population of Omak, Washington.

So, was Jesus testing them? What were they supposed to do?

I believe, rather than a test, this was another invitation to the disciples to see what Jesus can do. It's an invitation to trust. Trust and obey as the old hymn says. And they did trust, they did obey, and Jesus did “exceedingly abundantly, beyond what (they) could ask or imagine” as the apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 3:20. And the disciples became participants in this ministry of abundance-sharing.

This story tells us that *we have everything we need to be Jesus' hands and feet, to give and to serve others. We have everything we need to be Jesus' hands and feet, to give and to serve others.* Because when we take steps of faith, and simply do what we know we are called to do (like feed the hungry), Jesus will do even more than what we think is possible.

Problem is, like the disciples, we don't always believe that we already have what we need to give and serve. The disciples' response summarizes what our response is sometimes: the needs are enormous, the resources are few, so what can we do? The problem is too big to handle; it's an impossible situation. That reflects a scarcity mindset, which says: there isn't enough, or there may not be enough, so let's hang onto our scarce resources (or make others go find their own). Believing that there isn't enough to go around reflects a scarcity mindset; and a scarcity mindset is based on fear, not faith.

And so, Jesus helps the disciples move from fear to faith (and to compassion) by having them do some hands-on distribution of the resources that they *thought* were scarce.

It's so important to realize here that Jesus didn't just zap some more bread and fish into existence and have everyone take some on their way home. He invited the disciples to be the hands and feet that distributed the food to the

people. In an orderly fashion, at that! Jesus knew that a large group of hungry people could turn into a mob (think of when food and supplies arrive in refugee camps, and hordes of people charge the vehicles and start grabbing things). This could turn into a mob situation, so he gives the disciples an opportunity to exercise some leadership, by organizing the people. And then he gives them an opportunity to turn their hangriness into compassion—to turn their fear into faith—by distributing the food.

Their first mission trip was planned, and Jesus gave them instructions and training ahead of time about what to do, and they carried it out. This mission opportunity was a spur-of-the moment situation where they had to adapt and do what was necessary in the moment. Both became great hands-on learning experiences for the disciples.

There's nothing like some hands-on service with people in need to help develop our compassion, and increase our faith, as we become the hands and feet of Jesus to those in need.

The back-to-back accounts of sending the disciples on a mission trip, and then feeding the multitudes, reminds me of when we took groups of high school students and adults to Mexico on mission trips every year, from Anchorage, Alaska to Mexicali, just across the border of eastern CA. This was an up close and

personal, hands-on experience of giving, and serving people in abject poverty. Some of the people in the villages we served lived in mud huts, or houses made out of scraps of lumber and metal that they found in junkyards. Women had to scavenge for treasures in order to make jewelry and other trinkets that they could sell in an open market, and men had to stand outside of various places of business to see if anyone would hire them for a day, or just a part of a day, to make a few bucks to buy food for their families.

This was a transformative learning experience for our team.

Back at home in the comfort of a church classroom, we could've gotten out a flip chart and given the kids some facts about poverty, shown some pictures, and come up with some good ideas for solutions. Better than that was for them to see it first hand, and learn how to be leaders, and, to learn compassion by serving people directly. And trust that God can do more, through them, than they thought was possible.

This experience was as transformative for the adults as it was for the students. For example, one day while in the village we were serving, one of our moms disappeared for a while. I couldn't find her. Every day I was vigilant about keeping track of students and adults—constantly counting heads!—and I noticed that one of our adults had been gone from helping with VBS and a women's Bible

study. I thought, oh no, she's been kidnapped. But I eventually found her in the back of one of our vans, sobbing. She had never seen poverty like this or been part of a hands-on effort with people in true poverty, and met them face to face and heard their stories. She needed that time out, to weep over the poverty that exists in our world. That was her lament. And that experience changed her. She went home a different person and became active in local efforts to alleviate poverty, and recruited others to do it with her.

Everyone benefits from these kinds of experiences! And we don't have to travel thousands of miles to have them; more and more opportunities present themselves close to home. These kinds of experiences are important for our discipleship. It's why Jesus sent his disciples on these short-term excursions to learn and to practice their faith, and it's why he invited his disciples to participate in the feeding miracle that he wanted to perform. Because if they didn't participate, and if we don't participate, we are tempted to become passive. Or worse, apathetic. Being the hands and feet of Jesus keeps us in touch with what's really happening in the lives of others in our communities, and in the world, especially those on the margins. And, it changes us.

Again, as we partner with Jesus to be his hands and feet in the world to do things like feed the hungry, we do so knowing, first of all, that Jesus isn't daunted

by great needs. No challenge is too big, or seemingly impossible. In fact, not only is Jesus not daunted by great need, his heart goes out all the more. And as the needs become greater and greater in our region and our local communities, it changes nothing about Jesus' heart of compassion for people and their needs, or about the possibility of meeting those needs.

We also do this knowing that there are not just 12 disciples to distribute food, but hundreds of thousands of disciples from all kinds of different churches and Christian communities, who can cooperate with each other, like Jesus' disciples cooperated, in feeding the hungry. We're all on the same team—the Jesus team!—and we may as well team up and do this together. This is why I love seeing how many new partnerships are being formed these days between churches, and between churches and local organizations, to pool resources and do this work together.

If 12 disciples can feed thousands, think of how thousands of disciples can feed tens of thousands! We can do this.

Thomas Berry, a prominent ecologist and theologian (he called himself a “geologian”), gave a talk about the Biblical call to heal the planet, and someone replied, “But I’m just one person. What can I do?” His reply was, “Stop being just

one person.” Get with others and respond to the call together, and do the healing work together. And see what God will do.

This can apply to anything, and not just healing the planet and our environment. When it comes to feeding the hungry, don’t be just one person, or just one church. Jesus is still saying to his people today, “*You* give them something to eat.” And the “you” here is plural.

I think we all know that there is enough food, and the ability to grow enough food, to feed everyone in the world. But the scarcity mindset (and greed, let’s be honest) causes people to hold onto what they have, or accumulate more. It’s more complicated than that. But we can do our part to see the need, learn compassion, and participate, together, to create a more just world where everyone has enough.

We can do this. Because Jesus can do this. In fact, he has done it; and will continue to do it. When we trust, and act in faith, together, as Jesus’ hands and feet.

This being the first Sunday of Lent, as we prepare for events of Holy Week, there is a clear foreshadowing of Passover/Maundy Thursday in this account of the feeding of the multitudes. This is anticipatory of Jesus’ himself becoming the bread of life for the world. In fact, the words are almost exactly the same: he took

the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples. Took, blessed, broke, gave. This is a foreshadowing of what is to come, as Jesus prepares to give his very life, for the sake of the world.

Today we all are called to be disciples