

The Feeding of the Multitudes  
Matthew 14:13-21

As Jesus was preaching at the Sea of Galilee, he received word that John the Baptist had been executed by King Herod. Jesus had a great love for John, and he was deeply saddened by his death. He felt a need to get away from the crowds and spend time alone grieving. He instructed his disciples to row the boat they were in to the eastern end of the Sea of Galilee, where the Jordan River flows out.

This is a rough, lonely area. There is a narrow strip of shrubs and bushes and grass along the Jordan River. This green space is full of snakes, scorpions and all kinds of nasty varmints. When you get a short distance from the Jordan River, the ground quickly becomes dry and rocky. Then the valley ends with cliffs which go almost straight up three or four hundred feet.

If you are looking for a good place to get away from people, this is it. This is the wilderness where Jesus spent forty days alone being tempted by Satan right after his baptism. That is the wilderness he returned to when he wanted to be alone to grieve.

But the people on the shore were not ready to let Jesus go. When they saw him rowing away, they began running along the shore. They passed through village after village. The villagers would ask them where they were going in such a hurry. They would point out to the boat in the lake and tell them Jesus was in the boat. The villagers would join them. By the time they got to the east end of the lake there were 5,000 men and the women and children who could keep up with them. They were there waiting when Jesus disembarked from the boat.

Jesus was surprised to see them. In spite of his grief, he ministered to them. The time grew late. The disciples became concerned. The crowd had not had time to get food to take with them. There was no food there in the wilderness. They asked Jesus to dismiss the crowds and send them back to the villages to get food.

Jesus never liked to see people go hungry. He still doesn't. He tells us that if we want to do something for him, one of the things we can do is to feed hungry people. He tells us that when he returns, he will reward those who feed the hungry.

So, Jesus told the disciples to feed the multitude themselves.

There's a story about a young pastor who was preaching on this text. He commented on what a miracle it was that Jesus could feed five men with five thousand loaves of bread and three fish. After the service one of the men said, "Preacher, I think I could feed five men with five thousand loaves and three fish." The preacher realized his mistake. The next Sunday he decided to rectify his error. He said, "The miracle is that Jesus fed five thousand men with five loaves and three fish." Then he looked at the man who had corrected him and said, "Now, do you think you could do that?" The man said, "I could if you let me have the leftovers from last week."

Well, that preacher actually made two mistakes. Jesus fed five thousand with five loaves, not the other way around. That was one mistake. The other mistake was that Jesus didn't feed the five thousand at all. It was his disciples.

The five loaves and the three fish belonged to the disciples. They just gave what they had to Jesus. He blessed it and gave it back to them. And the disciples were the ones who handed out the food. They gave small portions to the ones closest to them and said, "Be grateful you are first. This isn't going far." But as they kept passing out the food, there was always a little more, until they fed the whole crowd, and there were twelve baskets of food left over.

There are a couple of lessons in this for us. First of all, we can do far more than we think we can. We just need to take what we have and put it in Christ's hands. Christ will bless it and give it back to us. Then we need to use what we have to do Christ's work. When we do, we might very well be amazed at how much we can accomplish.

We have people here in this congregation who have been a part of ministries that have literally fed thousands of people. We have people who have been a part of ministries that have led hundreds of men, women and youth into a deeper experience and understanding of the grace of God. We have people who have touched the lives of hundreds of inmates in the state penitentiary with the good news of the Gospel of Christ. Our young people have helped countless numbers of elderly and poor people to have more livable homes.

That is to say nothing of what you are doing right here to touch people's lives in this church. How many lives have you Sunday School teachers touched? How many people have been lifted by the prayers and the love of your fellow members during times of crisis?

How many people have you touched through the missions and ministries of our denomination throughout the world? We have orphanages in Siberia. We have a seminary in Africa.

You have fed the multitudes literally and spiritually, because you have been willing to place your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness in the hands of Christ. Christ has taken what you have given him, blessed it, and returned it to you to be shared with the hungry, and they have been fed.

And so have you. "Cast your bread upon the waters, and it will be returned to you sevenfold." We have a hunger to do good. When we share what we have with the hungry, our hunger is satisfied as much or more than theirs. That's why Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." It's a blessing to receive—no question about that. But it is an even greater blessing to see people smiling and at peace because they have been fed and to know that we were the ones who fed them by the grace of God and the blessings of Christ.

It's a miracle. Jesus said that we would do greater things than he did. We have, and we are. Jesus touched the lives of thousands during his time on earth. By the power of the Spirit of Christ, we are touching the lives of billions. That's a miracle.

And it is a wonderful blessing. This morning I invite you to rejoice, be happy and celebrate, knowing that Christ is using you in a mighty way. You are the disciples who are feeding the multitudes.

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