

What We Do With What We Have

Matthew 14:13-21

August 3, 2008

I.

Today's Gospel about feeding the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus reported in all four Gospels. It's an important part of the story of Jesus' ministry, and has been given much attention by scholars and theologians. As a result, there are differing interpretations of its meaning.

Some say that it calls us to provide for the physical needs of others. They point out that we live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. And they correctly say there is something wrong with that picture. There is a distribution problem.

Others say that today's reading addresses spiritual needs rather than physical needs. They point out that we live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there seems to be a distribution problem.

And still others say it's a message to the church to take whatever resources it has and minister to the crowds, both spiritually and physically. It's a call for the church to understand that its work is not limited by budgets and strategic plans, but also extends beyond itself with a mission that God will bless and sustain.

All of these interpretations are valid. The common thread running through them is that God wants us to take some initiatives in faith, even if the outcomes are unclear to us, and if we do so he will be with us. We, however, have a natural tendency to allow worldly realities to creep into our spiritual lives. Sometimes we mislead ourselves by limiting our work for God to what we perceive is possible in the world.

II.

There's a story that demonstrates how appearances can be misleading. A salesman had an important call to make on a new customer the next day, and so that night he set his alarm for 6:00 am to give himself enough time.

He was anxious about the interview, woke up five minutes early, and saw the clock said 5:55. That was close enough, so he got up and turned on the television just in time to hear the station identify itself as channel five. And then he looked at his calendar and saw the date was May 5. In the back of his mind he started to become more attuned to the number five.

Then he reviewed the information about the company he was going to visit. Its name was Five Star Industries, and its address was 555 5th Street. And when he got there he saw from the building directory that the company's offices were on the 5th floor. He wondered if this might be a good omen.

He arrived on the fifth floor and met with his customer, who placed a five hundred thousand dollar order. By this time the number five was starting to loom very large.

Then, when he left the building he saw a coffee shop across the street called "The Five Minute Break." Somebody must be trying to tell me something, he thought. So he went in and sat down, and noticed newspaper on the table. It was open to the racing form on the sports page.

And his eye just happened to catch the fact that a horse named "Five Spot" was running in the fifth race at the local track, and the odds were 5:1. Well, this was more than he could resist. He quickly left the coffee shop, caught a cab for the track, ran up to the \$50 window, and bet \$500.

Wouldn't you know that he got to his seat five minutes before post time, the race was run, and Five Spot finished—fifth!

The point of this story is that sometimes things are not as they appear. It can be easy to draw the wrong conclusion from what seem to be compelling circumstances. In the context of our faith, we can have our own understanding of a situation, but God sees it in a different way.

And that was what happened on that Galilean hillside. The disciples saw things one way but Jesus saw them another way. The disciples drew one conclusion. but Jesus' reality was very different.

III.

The Gospel tells us Jesus had been teaching to the crowd for a long time that day, and it was getting late. However, there were no concession stands like we have today to keep the crowds happy, and there were no youth groups to make spaghetti lunches. The disciples were getting worried. They knew that a large crowd could become restless, and so they basically told Jesus to wrap it up so people could leave and get something to eat.

But Jesus didn't see a restless crowd. Mark's version tells us he saw sheep with no shepherd. So, what did he do? He said to the disciples, "You give them something to eat."

Whoa! What must the disciples thought about that? Did they hear Jesus correctly? "You give them something to eat." Maybe they thought, "Jesus, what are you talking about, we're in the religion business; not the catering business."

If that's what they thought, Matthew wisely omitted it. Instead they asked how they could feed the people with only five loaves and two fishes. Like the salesman whose obsession with the number five misled him, the disciples also were focused on numbers and did not realize what Jesus was doing.

But Jesus told them to collect whatever was available, and the disciples obeyed. They did what Jesus said and, as we say, the rest is history. We know what happened. There was food left over.

IV.

So, how does this story speak to us today? Even though God met the needs of the hungry crowd, we should not assume that God simply will meet all our needs all the time. God does not always say "I'll do it." Sometimes he tells us, like he told the disciples, "You do it." And if we trust in God then we can see, like the disciples saw, that the things we have can go further than we think.

And note that in today's reading, Jesus did not feed the people directly. He did it through the disciples. God's power clearly was present, but that power was working through the disciples.

That still is true today. It's up to us. No matter what interpretation emerges from this story, whether it is meeting peoples' physical needs, or their spiritual needs, or energizing the church to do so, we are called to do our part. Just as Jesus told the disciples, "you do it," he also tells us the same, even though at times we think we don't have the resources or abilities necessary for the task.

This can be a challenge for us, and for the church. How many times has the church said "we're in the religion business, not the catering business, so to speak?" How easy has it been for churches to respond as the disciples would have responded—by not providing because they didn't think they had enough?

There is no doubt the world is faced with poverty and injustice on the outside, and disbelief and faithlessness on the inside. There is physical hunger in the third world, and we cannot deny that there is spiritual hunger in our own. But what do we do? Do we, in effect, say we only have five loaves and two fish, and this problem is more than we can handle, or do we come to Jesus in faith?

And sometimes the church can respond badly. I have seen priests who cared only about their rituals and their rites, and seemed unaware that homeless people were struggling to survive only blocks away. At the other end of the spectrum, I have seen priests obsessed with social activism, and the only time they really enjoyed wearing their collar was on the picket line.

The solution would seem to be obvious, for those priests and for us in the church. Just find a balance between the two extremes. All we have to do is bring ourselves to God, do the best we can, and trust in him to do the rest.

Today's gospel tells us that when we share what we have there will be enough for all. It tells us that Jesus asks more of us than we think we have to give, but if we do give what we have, then Jesus has a way of making it be enough.

And that's easy to say when we are giving advice to others. It's easy to say when we are talking to somebody else. But the real problem comes when we have to do it in our own lives.

Let's face it. When planning for ourselves, we don't want to go beyond what we know we can handle. That's true when considering a possible job change, or when making a decision about whether we can tithe to the church this year, or when trying to decide other important questions.

But looking only at our own resources and abilities is not always what God calls us to do—and here is the key point. God does not call us to do only those things that we know we can do on our own. God also calls us to do things that would not be possible without his help. We can limit ourselves to things we can handle, like the disciples in today's Gospel wanted to do, or we can step out in faith and do more, which is what Jesus wanted them to do.

The disciples on that hillside told Jesus "We have a problem." Jesus said, "You solve it, and I will be there to help you."

That applies today. If we limit our visions and ministries to only those things we are sure we can do ourselves, then they probably don't reflect much of a vision or ministry. But if we reach beyond ourselves, as Jesus told the disciples to do, and if we commit to something that is only possible with God's help, then we can see that God's abundance can be more than sufficient.

VI.

Today's gospel has two messages for our lives and the future of our church. Certainly, there is a recognition that feeding the hungry today is the continuation of Jesus' ministry. But there also is another message, which is that the mission of the disciples on that hillside also is our mission today. Just as they obeyed and let Jesus' power work through them as a group to minister to the crowd, so also we are called to let Jesus work through us as a community to build up people around us.

If we bring to God our strengths and weaknesses, our skills and shortcomings, our faith and our doubts, our successes and our fear of failure, he will make us adequate to the task. He can take our paltry little loaves and fishes and turn them into a feast. He will equip us for ministry and mission, and he will enable us to do what is needed with what we have. *Amen.*