

“You Feed Them!”

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[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

There is only one miracle of Jesus included in all four gospels. It's this miracle we just heard about – the feeding of the multitude. And this miracle is not something that Jesus planned to do. The first line of our Gospel lesson for today begins “Now when Jesus heard *this*,” but the “this” is not given in the passage that we read today. The “this” was the death of John the Baptist. It was the tragic, brutal death of John. The death of His cousin of course grieved Jesus and so Matthew records that Jesus got away to a deserted place by himself. Or so it seemed, until the crowds found Him. Now, under the circumstances, we would probably forgive Jesus for getting angry at the crowds and telling them to leave Him alone. They've just tracked Him down when He didn't want to be found, and telling them to “beat it” would be understandable. But that's not what Jesus does. Matthew records it this way – “He had compassion for them.” In the midst of His own grief and pain, Jesus had compassion for the people who had chased Him into the deserted place. And Jesus cured their sick and spent time with them all, until they got hungry and the disciples suggested that Jesus send them on their way. But, of course, Jesus, the compassionate one, would have nothing of the sort. He turns the situation back on the disciples, saying “*You* give them something to eat.” They had to just *love* that. “There's not enough here Jesus – there's not even enough for *us* to eat.” And, then, you know what happens – Jesus takes the meager amounts of food, blesses it, and gives it back to the disciples to distribute. From the original two fish and five loaves, the multitudes are fed, with much left over.

What happened? There are a couple explanations that I'd like us to consider. The first is the traditional explanation – this was a miracle of multiplication. Jesus blessed the food and then caused the food to multiply in quantity so that there was plenty for all. Now, let me be perfectly clear – I have *no problem at all* with that understanding of what took place. Even though I have an undergraduate degree in a field of engineering and a miracle is not explainable by the sciences, I've got no problem with that. I believe in God's miracles. I believe that such things took place then and take place now, and I have no problem whatsoever with the belief that the miracle here

was of Jesus multiplying the food. However, there is another possible interpretation of what took place that day, and it's no less miraculous.

There is an alternate explanation that says that Jesus didn't increase the quantity of food from the original two fish and five loaves. This explanation says that the people gathered that day had brought food with them – some of them brought just enough for them to eat, but not enough to share with others, some had brought a bit more. Each person was holding on to what they brought for fear that if they let it go, they wouldn't have enough to eat. The Matthew version of this story doesn't say where the disciples got the food, but the Mark version tells us it was from a little boy. So, when the gathered crowd saw Jesus' confidence that they would be fed and saw a little boy share what he had brought, they too began to put what they brought into the baskets. And, little by little, as more and more shared, the baskets began to overflow. The result of everyone sharing was a bountiful meal with more than enough for all to eat.

In the Greek, the word “you” in “you feed them” is plural. From my southern roots, this would be “y'all.” *One* of us does not have enough resources, but *all of us* together certainly do. Jesus is challenging us to work together for the good of others. Just a few weeks ago on a Florida beach, a mother noticed her sons were too far from the shore and were screaming for help. The mother and other relatives swam to them, but they too became trapped in a rip current. The mother believed the whole family was going to drown. However, other people at the beach that day formed a human chain of about 30 people, reaching from the shore to the family, and then passed the family members, one by one, up the chain to safety. The mother said “I am so grateful. These people were God's angels that were in the right place at the right time. I owe my life and my family's life to them. Without them, we wouldn't be here.”¹ One person was not enough to save this family; it took a chain of strangers who cared enough to reach out, potentially putting themselves at risk, rather than just staying on the beach.

I know that some of us will have problems with the explanation that everyone helped each other and that is how they were all fed – and that's fine. I don't present it to undermine anyone's belief in miracles. Let me repeat, I believe in God's miracles and have no issue at all with the belief that Jesus multiplied the food that day. But I also don't have a problem with believing that the miracle that Jesus produced was the miracle of getting everyone to share. The culture of that day was what is called a “limited good” society. What that means is that the belief of the day was that

¹<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/07/11/florida-beachgoers-form-human-chain/467152001/>

there was only a limited amount of resources and for one person to profit, another person had to lose. Sharing, then, meant that someone else would profit from you, and it would happen to your own detriment. Today, we often say “there’s always more where that came from,” but the society of the day would be completely unfamiliar with such a sentiment. There was *not* plenty more. And so, getting people to share with one another sounds like a miracle to me.

In fact, I’ve seen this miracle take place first-hand. About ten years ago, I spent a week in Atlanta at The Open Door Community, a ministry for people experiencing homelessness, which has, sadly, now closed. This trip was part of a seminary class. On one day, Ed Loring, the Presbyterian minister who led the Open Door, took us students on a field trip to downtown Atlanta. We encountered such profound disparity in wealth. In the shadow of glistening multimillion dollar skyscrapers were people whose few possessions were on their bodies or in their bags. Among many other homeless people, we encountered a seventeen-year-old homeless and visibly pregnant girl, sleeping on the hot concrete right next to a large replica of the seal of the state of Georgia, with the words “wisdom” and “justice” featured prominently. The irony was not lost on us. As well-dressed people walked hurriedly by, this young girl tried to sleep through her hunger. They didn’t even notice her. We spoke with her and asked how we could help. She told us that she needed food. Now, none of us had any money or food on us. In fact, Ed had instructed us to go downtown with empty pockets. I very quickly started doubting Ed’s instructions! Why did we come with no money? Why did we create a situation where we could not help this young woman in need? I had money in my wallet back at the Open Door Community and I would gladly have shared of my resources with her.

When this young girl asked for food, Ed said “Our sister is in need, but we have no money to buy her food. What are we going to do?” For what seemed an eternity, but was probably only 30 seconds, we looked at each other with dumbfounded expressions. Finally, a classmate of mine figured out the lesson that Ed was teaching us, and without a word, turned and started heading toward someone walking by. He asked this total stranger for a little spare change for this girl in need. More classmates soon set out to speak with others, walking by on their lunch breaks or on their way to an appointment or to shop. In just minutes, my class had gathered up enough loose change from total strangers on the streets of downtown Atlanta to buy this young girl a sandwich. As the class gathered money, Ed proclaimed loudly, “There’s more than enough in the kingdom.” I was amazed by the lesson I had just learned and by the miracle of strangers on the streets of

Atlanta opening their wallets for a young homeless girl they would never see again. Yes, I call *that* a miracle. Our culture is often nearly as much a “limited good” society as the culture of Jesus’ day.

“There’s more than enough in the kingdom.” We look around and see hunger and poverty in our world and we despair. We wonder how this can be and we ask God “why do you allow these people to starve?” God responds: “I don’t – *you* do. You are my hands and feet on earth. If any are starving, it is because you allow it.” We ask Jesus to send them away, and He tells us “*You* feed them.”

“There’s more than enough in the kingdom.” The world’s wealth is accumulated into such a tiny percent of its population, with huge amounts of it in this country. Most of us have enough, many of us have much more than enough, while others go hungry day after day, and tens of thousands of people die of hunger each day. What is the solution to the poverty of the world? The solution is for Christians to follow the words and actions of Christ, and share.

Perhaps we need a new perspective on life. One way to look at it is to ask this question: “do we operate according to a mindset of abundance or of scarcity?” The culture of Jesus’ day certainly had a mindset of scarcity, but do we live up to our “there’s plenty more where that came from” philosophy? Do we live lives of abundance, or do we look around at the needs of others and say “God bless ‘em, but we’ve only got enough here to take care of ourselves”?

There are real needs in our world. There are millions of people living in real poverty, in conditions that most of us cannot even begin to understand. Many of them are in our country and more than we might think are right here in our community. Why does God let that stand? Why do we let that stand? Why do we accumulate so much, while others have so little? Why do we feel that our resources are so scarce when we are living in abundance? I am happy to say that our church takes helping others seriously. Giving 10% of our yearly budget to missions, and nearly 10% of our Forward 150 Capital Campaign funds to missions are concrete ways that we demonstrate our commitment. The money put into these funds has been used by Mission Team to help people out of poverty, locally, nationally, and internationally. Some examples are Salt & Light, which teaches people skills and allows them to volunteer in return for store credit to purchase needed food, clothes, and household items. Courage Connection, our most recent Raindrop Project Recipient, enables those escaping domestic violence to get on their feet and become self-sustaining. The DREAAM House is funded partly through our Forward 150 Mission Fund, and works diligently to help boys to succeed in the education system. The Forward 150 Mission Fund

provides educational loans in the Dominican Republic through Opportunity International so education is more accessible. Our church desires to help others, and our funds combined with funds from other churches does a tremendous amount of good around the world through the PC(USA) Mission Agency. Finally, untold hours of service from individual members of our church have been carried out over the decades, truly impacting our community and world.

Rev. Jill Dullfield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook* writes “When we are faced with the mindboggling hurts of humanity, our deepest griefs, heaviest burdens and greatest fears should not move us to self-protection, but instead open our hearts to the pain of creation. Don't look away or run away, go ashore and into the chaos, armed with vulnerability and compassion.”

How do we serve others in God's kingdom? By living with a spirit of abundance, rather than a spirit of scarcity. How do we meet the needs of the congregation and community? By remembering that “There's more than enough in the kingdom.” What are we to do when others are hungry, we ask Jesus? He tells us: “*You feed them.*”

May we have the grace, wisdom and the courage to do so. Amen.