

Matthew 14:13-21 – “Give Them Something to Eat”

Community CRC

August 2, 2020

Holy Spirit lead us now to trust your word to us as we open Scripture and sit in the presence of our Savior. May the words that we read be for us your living Word – convict us, call us, and empower us through this word. Amen.

Jin and Mary are friends I made back in seminary, and they seem to have a tireless enthusiasm for serving God and the church. Quite frankly, it’s an enthusiasm that often put my classmates and I to shame. In addition to completing the normal school assignments that seemed to overwhelm most of us, and having two small children, Jin and Mary would spend their free time translating theological books into Chinese. They translated many books, some by people you may have heard of: Herman Bavink, Richard Mouw, Jamie Smith, D.A. Carson, John Piper, Tim Keller, and Joel Beeke. This list has undoubtedly grown since I last talked to them four years ago. And on top of their seemingly endless enthusiasm for serving God and the church in China, they’re just really, really nice and generous people – completely unpretentious and very approachable. They would always stop to ask how my kid are doing or how I’m feeling. I assume this kindness is extended to the other people in their lives as well.

I imagine that we all know, or at some point have met people like Jin and Mary. People who never seem to tire of serving God and others – these are the people who are always the first to volunteer, the first to bring you a casserole when you’re sick or send you a card, these are people who are always giving and who seem so full of God’s love and compassion that they cannot help but overflow, while the rest of us kind of just sit by, kind of weary from our own small efforts.

So maybe it comes as a surprise to you this morning to notice that the disciples do not seem to fall into the category of people who never tire of serving God and others – they look kind of exhausted. I mean, it makes sense that they would be exhausted; discipleship is a difficult journey, there are a lot of demands. Just a short time before the miracle that we read about this morning Jesus sent the disciples on the mission trip of a lifetime. This mission trip wasn’t about painting houses or fixing someone’s leaky roof – the kinds of things I, and maybe you, have done on mission trips. The disciples spent their mission trips on the street corners preaching, “The kingdom of God is near.” They went to the sickest people and healed them, they drove out demons, and Jesus even gives them the authority to raise the dead. In groups of 2, they spent their mission trip doing the same kind of miraculous things that they had seen Jesus do. But Jesus warns them that it won’t be easy or even all that much fun – they were sent out like sheep among the wolves.

Imagine getting back from a mission trip like that – it would take more than an afternoon nap to recover, and more than an evening get-together or a few pages in a journal to debrief and process all the things that had happened. The disciples got back from this mission trip where they

had witnessed the power of God at work through them, and they look exhausted. Then fast-forward a bit and the disciples are trying their best to decode Jesus' cryptic messages that he insists on communicating in parables. And finally they receive the news that John the Baptist had been killed by Herod. Discipleship is a difficult journey, there are a lot of demands, even danger.

They take note of this danger and decide to leave on a private boat to a quiet place – an unpopulated place outside the city in the wilderness - where they could eat, and where they could rest and recover and find some safety. But Jesus was becoming uncomfortably popular, and perhaps news was spreading that his disciples could perform miracles now too, so sick, injured, or otherwise troubled people followed them. As their boat got closer to the shore, they wonder if perhaps they had miscalculated the distance – this didn't look like a quiet place. This looked like the city center...it was swarming with people. The exhausted eyes of the disciples look to Jesus for an excuse to keep going, to get away from this crowd of people. Perhaps they even suggest as much to “Jesus, let's just keep going, we can get ahead of them, we can find a quiet place!” But Jesus has compassion on the crowd. The disciples are eager to get rid of the crowds, to send them away and finally get some peace and quiet and rest. So they try again after Jesus had taught the crowds for awhile, “Teacher, this is a remote place and it's already very late. Wouldn't it really be in their best interest to send these people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat?” But Jesus answered, “You give them something to eat.” The disciples had already given so much of themselves when they traveled around and preached and cast out demons and healed the sick. They did not have enough left of themselves to help these people. They were exhausted. They didn't have enough bread for 5000+ people, not enough money to buy that much bread, and certainly not enough energy to go find that much bread and then pass it all out – even if they *could* afford it! “That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?” Jesus' command to his disciples just seemed impossible. “You give them something to eat.” How could they? They had nothing to give these people.

You also hear Jesus telling you, “Give them something to eat”, but you're sure you don't have enough to give. Discipleship is a difficult journey and there are a lot of demands. You hear Jesus telling you, “Give them something to eat,” when you hear about the needs of people who have lost their jobs or had their hours reduced as a result of the pandemic. The Daily Bread Food Bank is a Toronto based food bank charity. Earlier this week they published a report that shows 6,100 people in Toronto began accessing food banks in June (that's not the total number, that's just the *new* clients) – this is up from 2000 new clients in February, more than 200% increase.¹ These people, quite literally, need something to eat. But you've spent your days at an exhausting job, or with needy children, or maybe even summer school. Their need is so great and you're just one person.

¹ <https://www.kitchenertoday.com/around-ontario/canadian-food-bank-sees-surge-in-clients-amid-pandemic-related-food-insecurity-2600382>

You hear Jesus telling you, “Give them something to eat,” when you read about the different organizations that Community supports through our second offerings. But you’ve finally paid the bills for this month and you’ve even given some money to the church already – you feel like you don’t have enough left to give. This may especially be the case if you yourself are among those who have lost their jobs or had hours reduced because of the pandemic.

Or you hear Jesus telling you “Give them something to eat,” when you hear of a co-worker or classmate who you know is feeling overwhelmed and burdened with life. You know that if Jesus were here he would have compassion – he would reach out, he would listen, he would give something of himself to help this hurting person. But you just keep to yourself...you have enough on your own plate to take care of, you cannot possibly do anything for the needs of this broken person too. Maybe you just feel tired of it all – tired of the pandemic, tired of the isolation, tired of the statistics, tired of the political games, tired of the need. You feel like you do not have enough left to give.

So it’s with an exasperated sigh that disciples scatter, some to go see how much of their own provisions were left in the boat, others to gather what they could from the people nearby. And gathering in a huddle the disciples place their meager offerings before Jesus – five flat, round, loaves of bread and two small, salty, dried fish – nothing fancy, certainly not the makings of a banquet feast. The people are organized into groups, as if everyone were taking their seats around long tables where they would wait for their meal to be served.

Jesus, the host of this meal, invites the disciples to bring their meager offerings to him. “Bring them here to me,” he says. He speaks the customary Jewish blessing over the bread and fish. Perhaps the people in the crowd are expecting just another teaching lesson, maybe a reminder about how God provided manna for their ancestors in the wilderness. But were they actually expecting to eat? Were they expecting a miracle on par with the wilderness provisions of manna that they had heard about for generations?

The tired disciples figure that they’ll at least indulge Jesus for a few minutes, it won’t take long for them to pass out this a few loaves of bread and fish. Then maybe Jesus will actually let the crowds go home and get a real meal and they can finally get the rest they’ve been looking for. But having given every bit of that food away they return to Jesus empty handed and Jesus gives them more. And they deliver that food to the next group of people. And having given every bit of that food away they return to Jesus empty handed, and Jesus gives them more. And on it goes until the disciples have given food to every single group of people gathered. Now, this is certainly not an extravagant banquet that the tired disciples have served up, it’s just normal, daily food: bread and fish. On their own the disciples could not come up with enough food to give the people something to eat. But in Jesus’ hands these meager daily provisions are multiplied into an abundance of food. Twelve basketfuls of broken bread and fish were left over. People had eaten until they were satisfied and there was far more left over than what they had started with. Jesus honored, used, and magnified their efforts to serve.

This was, in many ways, a new kind of wilderness manna provision. But instead of the bread and meat falling from the sky, it came from the hands of Jesus, through the hands of the

disciples, and out to hungry people. There are some people who read this miracle as really something less than miraculous. Maybe you have heard something like this: that the real miracle here is that the people in the crowd were so inspired by the generosity of the disciples who shared with them that they pulled out their own sack lunches and shared with the people around them. That the real miracle here is a kind of inspired generosity – the people dug a little deeper and really came up with the food themselves – Jesus just inspired them. I know many people who find that reading of this parable really inspiring and motivating, and more than just a few people who prefer this reading because miracles seem unscientific and unbelievable. But it seems to me that this reading might actually miss the point that Matthew is trying to make, which is that Jesus is not just a motivational speaker or a kind of moral example for the crowd. Jesus is actually doing the heavy lifting here – *he* is providing for the crowds, through the hands of the disciples. When the disciples were sure they did not have enough left to give, Jesus didn't just motivate them to dig a little deeper, find a little more, he actually provided what they needed - even in abundance - so that they could give the people something to eat.

And today, when we hear the voice of Jesus say, “give them something to eat,” we can be sure that God will also provide what we need, even when we're sure we do not have enough to give. God honors, uses, and magnifies our efforts to serve. And you know what, this magnification might not be of anything fancy or extraordinary, it might just be bland old bread and fish. But it comes right from the hands of Jesus, and then through our hands and out to a hungry world. Having the opportunity to build relationships with refugees is one way that I have seen this kind of magnifying or multiplying power of God. Drayton Reformed Church- where my husband pastors - began their sponsorship of a Syrian refugee family about four years ago, just before my family and I moved to Drayton. It started with a simple apartment furnished with the necessities, but God transformed that apartment into a place where mutual love and support were also found. At one point, one of the deacons confessed that he began the sponsorship process by feeling pretty complacent and initially he just offered his help out of obligation. “But,” he said, “about 6 months later something in me changed, and I began to see them as part of my family.” He said this as he stood in front of the congregation advocating for the church to begin sponsorship of another family. God transformed his somewhat skeptical attitude to one of joy and love – this family had become part of his family. God transformed all the help with errands and the financial support and all the meals shared together into a life-giving relationship for both the refugee family and the deacon's family.

Maybe you see this magnifying and multiplying power of God in other ways. It may come in the form of a simple, sustaining prayer said with your roommate on your way out the door for the day. God takes what little you have to offer this friend and transforms it into hope and peace to sustain him for another day. Or maybe God's provision comes in the form of a bag of groceries that you drop off for your neighbor or a small care package that you send to a university student far from home. Even when you're sure you don't have enough to make a meaningful dent in their need, God takes what little bit you do have and transforms it into a kind of love and support that disarms your neighbors or that reminds a college student that there are

people at home loving her and praying for her. And you know what, it might not be anything super fancy or extraordinary– it might be – but maybe it’s just bread and fish, daily provisions that come from the hands of God, and then through our hands and out to a needy world.

So this morning, as God calls you to give in whatever ways you can, whether it’s time, prayer, talents, gifts, relationships, advocacy, or money, we’re responding to Jesus when he says: “Bring what you have here to me”. We look forward with anticipation to the ways that God will multiply our offerings. Not so much that money will multiply – but we look forward to seeing the ways in which God will multiply our offerings into life-affirming relationships, meaningful connections, and perhaps even some much-needed hope and rest to those who need it. We trust that God will multiply our offerings in such a way that even we will have more faith, more hope, and more love than when we began. Thanks be to God for these abundant provisions.

Generous God, thank you for this the gift of your Word. Embolden us now to bring what we have to you, whether it is the makings of a feast, or just simple things. God, multiply our offerings for the sake of the world that you love. Amen.