

Matthew 14:13-21 *When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said.¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Trust God to provide abundantly

1. Because of his compassion
2. Even through times of testing
3. He provides abundantly
4. So we can trust him

We all have those old favorite stories that we share with our family and friends. When you get together with certain family members or friends, the conversation will get around to an old favorite story. The gospel lesson for today is an old favorite story about Jesus and his disciples. There are some favorite stories which are told only one time in the gospels, such as, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the sheep and the goats. But the story today about the miraculous feeding is not merely told once. It is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospels. Maybe because it captures the essence of Jesus as the Son of God and it captures the essence of God and his abundant and extravagant generosity and grace. Let us learn from this story to trust God to provide abundantly.

"I've got to get away!" Have you ever said that or felt that way? The hectic pace of everyday life often catches up with us. We feel a need to find some solitary place where we may enjoy rest and relaxation. It may be a campground, a cottage or a resort. It may be a sunny beach or a lake in the woods.

Jesus and his disciples also needed a break. News of John the Baptist's murder by Herod had just reached them. Jesus' disciples would find this news disturbing. Several of them had once been followers of John. That this power-happy monarch, his vindictive queen, and her sensuous daughter could bring about the death of a faithful servant of the Lord seemed like a foreshadowing of their own fate. In their private retreat, Jesus could address their fears by reassuring them that God was still in control and that all things work out for good according to his omniscient designs.

But their retreat was short-lived. *Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.* How do you think Jesus felt when he saw this crowd? I am reminded of Richard Dreyfuss in the movie "What about Bob?" He played poor Dr. Leo Marvin, a successful psychiatrist who just wanted to get away from work with his family. But one persistent patient, "Bob" played by Bill Murray, showed up at his vacation home and wouldn't leave. Eventually, Bob drove Dr. Marvin crazy.

Jesus didn't go nuts over this mob crowding into his private time. *When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.* Here is the essence of Jesus. He had compassion on them. Unlike Dr. Marvin, he put other people's needs above his own. He was moved to help, heal and minister to them.

Here's why we can trust God. When he looks at us, he doesn't see people who should be avoided but people to embrace the way a shepherd embraces a lamb. Don't feel like a cuddly little lamb? Don't think Jesus would want to touch you or your problems with a ten-foot pole? That may be true of others, those people you thought you could count on but now avoid you. Jesus is not like that. Jesus is not like most of us. Even we pastors get cranky and would sometimes rather not answer the phone because we just want some peace and quiet. Not Jesus. His love for you is perfect. His love for you is constant.

That doesn't mean we won't have trials in life. Jesus let his disciples struggle with the problem before stepping in. He did that to grow their faith. *As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."* 5000 men plus women and children. That's a lot of mouths to feed. From the disciples' point of view and with what little they had, the task was impossible. Why would Jesus ask this of them? Sometimes, it seems that Jesus expects too much of us and that he doesn't care.

In the second lesson today, Paul quotes from Psalm 44. *As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."* The picture here is a reference to the sheep who were kept for sacrifice in the temple. Hundreds of animals were sacrificed on a daily basis. Those animals were kept near Bethlehem. They were not allowed to mate, to run free or any of that. They were kept for one purpose, to be slaughtered in the Temple. They existed for no other purpose than to be sacrificed.

Is that what we are? Are we just sheep to be slaughtered? Is your life filled with trouble? Do good friends turn out to be not such good friends after all? Have you been passed over for promotion? Are you separated from your family because of your faith? Or perhaps people have ridiculed you because you are a Christian. Maybe you've suffered some serious physical handicap, illness or disfigurement. Are we just sheep to be slaughtered, destined for a life of trouble?

In defiance to all that troubles us, Paul said, *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* Paul wants us to think about life from a different perspective. He wants us to stop looking at things from inside our heart, but to look at things from the perspective of God's powerful love. Did you ever hear someone say, "We are worth so much to God that he sent his Son to die for us"? In a sense, that's true. But that turns things around. It puts the focus on man instead of God. The cross of Christ is not the measure of our worth; it is the measure of God's love. The cross gives worth to sinners. Christ did not die for us because we are worthy. We are worthy because Christ died for us. Paul wants to turn our thoughts from inside our heart, to God's powerful love.

We are slaughter sheep who follow the Lamb, a Lamb who was slain. So, we can face facts. We can face the fact that we are weak on our own. We can face the fact that we will have troubles in life. We can face the fact that there are powerful enemies trying to separate us from God. We can face the fact that the world is bound to crucify whatever is of God. But we can face all that with a clear-eyed faith, and look to the future with a firm confidence. We are more than conquerors! (Paul Wendland)

So, in the trials of life, let us learn to trust God to provide abundantly. *"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.*¹⁸ *"Bring them here to me," he said.*¹⁹ *And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.*²⁰ *They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.*

At every meal we have good reason to express our thanks. First, it is God who provides the food we have. And then we are not worthy of it. Daily we sin against him. We're not always satisfied with what we have. We don't always seek first his kingdom and righteousness. Often, we put selfish interests ahead of him. Only because of his goodness and mercy does the heavenly Father bless us with food, just as he forgives us our sins in Christ. So, let us learn to thank him and to trust him.

While Jesus provided the crowd with a filling meal and while there were some leftovers, he didn't give them a life-time supply of food. God prefers to give us only what we need on a day to day basis. Why is that? It's a matter of trust. God doesn't want us to forget about who gives us everything we have. He doesn't want us to think we can take care of ourselves. He wants us to trust him and to trust his Word.

In our first lesson, God asked, "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?" Can you imagine a hungry man going into a store and purchasing plastic fruit? The plastic may look real but they can't satisfy and they can't sustain life. So why do we waste ourselves on the things that don't sustain life also? What we need more than bread is the Bread of life. We need to face our spiritual poverty and thirst. Then we need to go to the market place of God's Word and drink in the free water of forgiveness and consume the Bread of life that we find in God's Word.

He places his mighty Word within earshot so that by the power of his Spirit we may hear and believe. He puts his very body and blood, under the bread and wine, right in our mouths as pledge and promise of sins forgiven. In the Word of forgiveness spoken by his called servants and in the proclamation of his gospel, Jesus himself acts to lift the burden of sin and guilt and to give life and freedom in exchange for death and bondage. (Harold Senkbeil)

Worn from struggle and fear, battered by sin and sorrow, we come with empty hands to receive his good gifts. Jesus does not disappoint; he makes good on his promises. We can trust him to provide abundantly.