

“You Feed Them!”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 14: 13-21

I’ve decided I am glad I do not have to shop for food for eighteen people on a regular basis. When we were on the mission trip with the youth in West Virginia, the adults went to the store to get the food and prepared it, while the youth did all the cleanup after each meal (I, and I think the other adults, were just fine with that!). The first night we were there, four of us went to the small Kroger’s about five minutes away to shop for the group. We got food for dinner that night, breakfast and lunch the next day, as well as some staples. The total was around \$160. At our house, we’re used to that amount of money covering food for at least a week and a half, if not two weeks. But you know what? Three of us were back at that Kroger’s the next day, spending a similar amount to cover the next two days for our large, hungry family!

As the week went on, our food costs trailed off as we ate down the kitchen. And I have to commend these young people. There was never any waste of food at a meal, and they ate much more healthily than I have witnessed groups in the past. We must have bought 100 bananas over the course of the week – next time we’ll invest in a banana tree or plant! But there were definitely times during our work camp week that I could identify with feeding the multitudes, much like Jesus and the disciples faced while on that hillside in Galilee.

The feeding of the five thousand is a story of turning scarcity into plenty. It is a story of God turning what we believe is very little into something that is very great. It is a story of Jesus showing us how deeply he loves us, showing mercy and compassion in a time of emotional weariness for him. And it is a story of empowerment, not only for his disciples that day on a Galilean hillside, but for us as 21st-century Christians.

To begin, consider the context of this story in Matthew. Immediately before the passage we read today, we learn of the fate of John the Baptist (14:1-12). On the occasion of King Herod’s birthday, the king granted any wish to Herodias’ daughter because she pleased him so. Her mother’s wish, which was hers to Herod, was the head of John on a platter. The king granted her wish, and after John’s death, the disciples took his body and buried it, then came to tell Jesus what had happened. It is after hearing this awful news that Jesus “withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (14:13). Jesus was seeking silence, solitude, peace from the crowds so he might be alone with his thoughts and feelings. John was not just a friend, he was Jesus’ blood relative, as well as the one sent by God to prepare the way for the

Messiah. Now the suffering has begun, and Jesus experiences through John what will be his own fate in the not-too-distant future.

Whenever we experience a tremendous loss – especially the death of a loved one – the last thing we wish to do is to go out and serve people. More often than not, we want to go into hiding, be by ourselves. Sometimes we don't even want to come to church, because when we see familiar faces it brings back the painful realization that the one close to us is no longer here.

At first, Jesus tried to do the same. He went out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee to be alone. But the crowds followed him, walking along the shore as he drifted away. Once he came back to the land, they were all there waiting for him. Instead of begging off and seeking to make excuses for that day, he did something that typified who he was and why he was sent in the first place. On seeing the great crowd coming toward him, he didn't get angry, or upset, or exasperated; rather, "he had compassion for them . . . (14:14)." He healed those who were sick, ministered to those in the most need. In the midst of his own sadness and grief, he reached out to others, for that was what he was sent to do.

After Jesus ministered to the crowds, it was time for him to empower his disciples in service. The disciples were obviously nervous and bewildered by the whole situation, and logistically they couldn't get their heads around how this all might work. They said to him, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (14:15). In other words, "Please don't make us figure out what to do here, Jesus – just send them away."

I have to admit, I've heard that uttered many times. There's too many people coming through our doors asking for assistance; let's just say "no" to all them and let someone else deal with them. There's too many children who are in need of care and mentoring; it's too overwhelming for us to deal with. There's too much need, too much poverty, too many to help; send them away and let them figure things out for themselves.

But Jesus will not accept his disciples' excuses, and he will not accept ours. Jesus does not take on the disciples' anxiety, and instead uses this situation as an opportunity to teach and empower his followers. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (14:16). When they tell him all that they have to work with – five loaves of bread and two fish – Jesus doesn't flinch: "Bring them here to me." And with his blessing and thanksgiving to God, those loaves and fishes were distributed to feed more than any human would have previously believed.

But you'll notice that Jesus doesn't expect his disciples – or us – to do these miracles on their own. After he tells his disciples, "You feed them," he then says, "Bring them here to me." Jesus did not tell the disciples to go and distribute the food on their own; he told them to bring it to him first. Only after bringing their resources to him were they able to serve in remarkable, transformative ways. When we have faith that the impossible is truly possible through the power of God, then God meets the needs of God's children

through the gifts, talents, energy, and abilities we possess as disciples of Jesus Christ.

One of the greatest crises we face as a country is hunger, and yet it is probably hard to convince most Americans that it is a crisis. The latest issue of National Geographic (August 2014) speaks directly to this need. Consider these facts:

1. One in six Americans says food runs out at least once a year, compared to one in twenty in many European countries.

2. The number of emergency food programs in the U.S. has mushroomed from a few hundred in 1980 to 50,000 today.

3. Nearly 60% of America's hungry have at least one working family member; more than half of America's hungry are white; and more than half live outside our cities.

These are not just the men and women standing at the intersections, panhandling for spare change. These are our neighbors. These are the children attending school in our community. These could be the man or woman or child sitting next to you this morning.

When facing such a massive dilemma as hunger in our country, we might be tempted to be like Jesus' disciples and say, "Send them home and let them buy food for themselves."

And yet, there is Jesus responding – to them and to us – saying, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." We do that in small yet significant ways here at John Knox: our support of St. John's Storehouse Food Pantry in our community; the food we distribute through New Beginnings in the church office; the way we feed our guests when we have an event, such as Vacation Bible School, tutoring, and congregational dinners; the financial support we offer to Gleaners and other emergency food assistance programs in our community.

But will we remember our Lord's command when decisions are made in our community that impact the hungry? Decisions about education, public transportation, vocational training and job creation, and housing have short- and long-term influences on those who are struggling to put food on the table for their families. How will we respond when those questions are asked – as citizens, as neighbors, as disciples of Jesus Christ?

When we complain that the task is too hard or too great, our Lord responds by saying, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." May we never shy away from what is hard, always remembering that we are never on our own. "Bring your gifts to me," says Jesus, and watch the miraculous transformation begin.

Thanks be to God. Amen.