

"God's Abundant Table"
Proper 13 Ordinary 18
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Charles Swindol tells a funny story about a nine-year-old named Danny who came bursting out of Sunday school like a wild stallion. His eyes were darting in every direction as he tried to locate either mom or dad. Finally, after a quick search, he grabbed his Daddy by the leg and yelled, "Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down, smiled, and asked the boy to tell him about it.

"Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian Army was gettin' closer and closer. So Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli Navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. They made it!

By now old dad was shocked. "Is THAT the way they taught you the story?"

Well, no, not exactly," Danny admitted, "but if I told you the way they told it to us, you'd never believe it, Dad."

Isn't that the attitude we need to have in this skeptical world of today. We in the church still cling to the truth of scripture, while those who are lost claim it is all fairy tales. The world in general prefers facts to faith so there is no room for the miraculous.

Today's gospel lesson brings us once again to the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. We may even question, "Did it really happen?" Many attempts have been made to "explain" the miracle, like this one, the people were so moved by the young boy's generosity that they shared food they had secretly brought, like the largest pot luck ever recorded. Another theory says that the story is not really talking about physical hunger but spiritual hunger. When the small amount of food was passed around everyone tore off a minuscule symbolic fragment. So Jesus satisfied the thirsty soul not the stomach.

These questions say more about us than they do Jesus. If Jesus is the Messiah, and I believe he is, then there is no question but that he performed miracles, and on a regular basis. The point of the story is to teach us three things:

I It first teaches us that Jesus fulfills God's Word. The Israelites waited for the Messiah to come for centuries, four to be exact, since the last prophet had spoken in the Land. Malachi called a backslidden nation to repentance 400 years before Christ. It had been longer still since Israel and Judah had a leader like David or Solomon or Moses. The scriptures were alive in the life of the Jewish people, generation to generation they taught that one day God would send the Messiah who would fulfill the hopes and promises of all those scriptures. The hungry group of 5000 men plus women and children gathered to hear the man from Nazareth, all questioning, "Is this the one?" Some surely had different motivation having heard of his healing the sick and loving the outcast but the burning question remained: Is this the Messiah or one of the Prophets?

A long day and the sun was beginning to set. They had listened for hours. At least 10,000 people, 5000 men and their families, sitting, listening, trying to answer the question. It was well beyond time for dinner and the disciples, feeling quite hungry themselves, wanted to send the people away.

But Jesus surprised his disciples. He said "You feed them!" I can just about see the dear in the headlights look on their faces. They responded we have only five loaves of bread and two fish, which the young boy has offered. But Jesus wanted them to see God at work, something beyond the world they had come to know and understand. He asked for the food, blessed it, broke it, and broke it again, and again. The food

went out like a piece of paper folded many times and now being unfolded. Then the people thought they understood. This is one of the Prophets who has returned.

The prophet Elisha, during the time of King David once fed 100 men with twenty loaves of Barley. In that story a servant in a time of famine brings 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in a sack as an offering to Elisha. Suddenly Elisha says, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But the servant said, "How can I set this before hundred people?" It sounds familiar doesn't it? We have nothing here, five loaves and two fish, might as well have been saying - we are just an old church in a small town that is changing. But Elisha says, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'"

The people had been taught, that Messiah would come in the spirit of the Prophets of old.. So Jesus stood on the hillside following history of old and feeds not 100 but over 10,000, and not with 20 loaves but five and two fish. It was clear to all this man was fulfilling the God's Word. This was God's messenger.

Jesus enters the world and the Old Testament comes to life. As he declared he fulfills the Law and Prophets. He has fulfilled God's Word.

And so the story ends, Jesus feeds them out of his compassion, and they all were satisfied. Matthew simply says they were satisfied.

II Secondly it teaches us that we are to serve at the Table of our Lord. Jesus told his followers - You feed them. God does his work through us. He multiplies our efforts because he cares. He nature is to care and provide in miraculous ways. That's what the Disciples are learning. They want to send these people home but God is at work. He is not done. As they are handed the bread they participate in something bigger than they ever expected, more than they can understand. Thousands are fed with the abundant food through Gods unfolding blessing by the Messiah who calls us to serve others.

III God has given us the ability to use what we bring, no matter how big or how small. Ours is to participate in the kingdom, not sit idly by. Jesus says, "Bring me what you have." And he blesses what we have, then tells us to distribute it to the crowd, and it's more than enough. In our lesson Jesus worked through the hands of his disciples to feed the hungry crowd. It still works that way today. God calls us and uses us to do His work in the world, to literally feed hungry people. But we are also called to be God's hands in spiritually feeding the lonely and the depressed and the hurting, the broken people who live all around us. We are called to speak a word of hope and love to others.

If we learn to trust God, not worry about the how but boldly trust God we'll one day look back and see how he has miraculously provided for our own needs in the midst of caring for others.

Extraordinary living begins with ordinary gifts. What gifts do you have to bring to God's abundant table? Today as we participate in this holy meal may you not just think of it as a little bread and juice. My you realize your own place in something so much larger than any of us.

Often we feel overwhelmed by the needs and demands of the world around us. Wars, earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding - We just don't see how our meager resources could possibly help, but we bring what we can. And God takes what we are willing to give, and blesses it, and uses it. And it's enough. No, it's more than enough.