

Bread, Fishes, and Co-operative Divine Action

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We join Jesus and his disciples roughly midway into their ministry. They have been traveling all around the region of the Sea of Galilee preaching the Kingdom and healing the sick, and Jesus has just visited Nazareth, his hometown, where he is rejected because of their familiarity with him. After this Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs and “gave them authority” over impure spirits and to heal diseases. They take no provisions for their journeys, but are told to rely on the hospitality of the villages they will enter. However, they are also given instructions about what to do when (not “IF”) they are rejected. We must imagine that this in fact happened from time to time, and that when it did the disciples moved on to the next place, hungry and exhausted. We don’t know how long this period in their ministry lasted (likely weeks, if not months), but it was likely a very difficult time. We do know that after some time the disciples **“gathered around Jesus”** again to report to him all they had done and taught (v.30).

Around this same time, and just before the disciples gather back together with Jesus, we hear of Herod’s execution of John the Baptist. Matthew tells us that John’s disciples recovered his body after Herod has him beheaded, and that they then went and told Jesus. John, recall, is the son of Mary’s relative Elizabeth, so Jesus and John were cousins of some sort. John baptized Jesus to inaugurate his public ministry. Jesus later declares that “among those born of women there is no one greater than John.” John and Jesus were close, and the news of John’s death at Herod’s hands must have been deeply hurtful and troubling.

So here is the context: we find Jesus and his disciples newly reunited at the shores of the Sea of Galilee, likely in Capernaum. The disciples have been traveling in pairs but apart from their Master and apart from the rest of their friends. They have traveled long and far without any provisions and we must assume that they are exhausted by their travels. At the same time Jesus, at least, is struggling with deep grief over the loss of his friend. On top of all of that, the whole group must be wrestling with fear; John was imprisoned and then executed for preaching a message of repentance; the same message the disciples have just finished spreading all over the countryside. What happened to John could also happen to any of them, and they must know it.

What do they do at this difficult juncture in their lives? They do what a lot of us do when life feels overwhelming: they plan a camping trip. **“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place to get some rest”**, says Jesus. The group is in desperate need of a break to reflect on what they’ve just done and to plan the next phase of their ministry. They need to swap stories of their time away in pairs, they need to refresh and get their feet back under them, and they need a chance to process the news of John’s death. A rest at this point is as well-deserved as it gets. So, they plan get out of the city, get into a boat, cross the Sea of Galilee, and look for a secluded place where they can be on their own for a short time, and maybe do some fishing.

I imagine this resonates with most of you. It certainly resonates with me. When my life starts to feel overwhelming nothing recharges my batteries like a few nights out in the Yukon. Often in the Fall I get away with some friends to spend some time letting go of all the hundreds of things pulling on my attention in my busy life at home, and focus on nothing more than figuring out how to get a fish to bite at a piece of hair or feather tied to the end of a string. I treasure that time; it

is precious to me, and I can begin to understand how important it was to Jesus and the disciples at this time in their lives.

This brings us to the first thing I want to point out about the story of Jesus' feeding of the 5000. Now that we understand the background to the story we can begin to appreciate the condition that Jesus and the disciples were in when they pull up to their special "secluded place" (perhaps a secret fishing hole?) only to see a large crowd of many thousands (we are told there were about 5000 men, but Matthew is explicit that that number doesn't include the women and children). I can almost feel that characteristic stomach-drop of disappointment when they see their secret fishing whole packed with people clamouring for their attention. These men are in desperate need of time away; a time to rest and relax. They have earned it through hard labour for the Kingdom. They DESERVE a break; Jesus most of all. His close friend has just been brutally executed; give the poor guy a break!

What do we read of Jesus' reaction to the crowd? **"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd..."** he threw his hands up in frustration and rebuked them? ...he turned the boat around and tried to find another secluded piece of shoreline? That's what I would have done. No, when Jesus sees the crowd that has just completely destroyed his plan to take a well-deserved break, he "has compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Understand and appreciate the great compassion of our Lord. On seeing the crowd and their hunger to learn more about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus' own needs (his exhaustion, his grief, his need to connect with his closest friends) all fade into the background. The people need him, and Jesus responds. Rather than sending them away or turning the boat around, Jesus gets out and begins to teach them. We can learn from this. Compassion for the needs of others is an awfully powerful and

underrated force; one can find energy that one never expected when one sets out to do a good work for the benefit of another. The next time life puts an opportunity in front of you to act in kindness toward your neighbour, don't concern yourself so much with whether the timing is right to take on another project like that. You might be surprised 55555555520by the unexpected energy and resources you find yourself with.

Jesus and the disciples end up putting their fishing rods away and spending the whole day teaching and ministering to the crowd, until it grows late in the day and it becomes obvious that one way or another, the people are going to need to eat. The disciples suggest to Jesus that he **“send them away so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”** I love Jesus' response to them, and basically the rest of the message I've prepared is a reflection on it. Mark 6:37: **“But he answered, ‘You give them something to eat’ ”**. Maybe Jesus is having some fun with them when he says this and is not really serious, but we should be careful about assuming that. Recall that just a few verses earlier Jesus told the disciples to go out on a long journey through the countryside, but to take no provisions for the journey. He wasn't joking about that.

What comes next is easy to characterize this way: After spending the day seeing to the spiritual needs of the crowd, Jesus is intent on meeting the physical needs of their bodies as well. If Jesus simply sends them on their way, many are going to go hungry - remember that they are in a remote place, there aren't many villages nearby and those that are near are unlikely to have food available late in the day. So, we might think, Jesus initially asks the disciples to figure out how to feed them only to demonstrate their powerlessness and ineptitude. Once that lesson is ground into them and they realize that they can do nothing of any significance, THEN Jesus rolls up his sleeves and feeds the crowd by himself.

That is a common way to understand the story, but I don't think it is quite what happens. Jesus has been including his disciples as partners in his ministry since he gathered them together, and they have reached the point, just prior to this story, where the disciples are fit to go out in pairs and continue the ministry without Jesus' immediate presence. They have been given authority to heal the sick, drive out demons, and preach repentance. When Jesus challenges them to give the crowd something to eat, I think he is quite serious about it: he intends to get this thing accomplished, but he intends to do it *with* the disciples and *through* their own efforts, rather than doing it independently after the disciples fail.

In support of this, consider this fact: The crowd ate fish and bread for dinner that day. They did not eat figs and dates, they did not eat steak and lobster, and they did not eat McDonald's Big Macs. Our God, the Lord of all Creation, *could* have fed them Big Macs that day. He had the ability to do so. Of course they wouldn't have known to call them Big Macs, and when Mark wrote about it he might have said that the Lord gave them strange new food that no one had ever seen before, that it was delicious for the first few bites but then made you feel sort of sick to your stomach after...

They ate fish and bread rather than Big Macs, and the reason they ate fish and bread is that Jesus did not conjure up food out of thin air for them. What happened, instead, is that Jesus instructed the disciples to give them something to eat. Those disciples considered trying to buy food from a nearby village, but rejected that idea very quickly; no one had that sort of money available. So, they set out to find what food they did have available to work with. John's gospel tells us that they found a boy with 5 small loaves and two small fish who was willing to share. Apparently, among the entire crowd, everyone else had already eaten their lunch or wasn't willing to give up their own lunch the way that boy did. In gathering the five loaves and two fish, the disciples exhaust their own ability to meet the needs of the crowd. They do what is in their

power to do, and they offer the results of that labour to the Lord. Jesus enhances those efforts, he multiplies what they come up with, and he adds growth to what they began. Note that Jesus doesn't even feed the crowd directly: **"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 his disciples to distribute to the people."** The disciples give what they have to the Lord, receive from the Lord what he returns to them, and then pass that along to others in the crowd. This is very different from Jesus rejecting their efforts as inadequate and then accomplishing the task on his own. In fact, Jesus and his disciples act in cooperation and in partnership to meet the needs of the crowd. The part of the task that falls to the disciples (and the boy - let us not forget him!) may seem insignificant compared to the part of the task that Jesus adds, but it does form the very basis of the miracle. We simply do not know what would have happened if the boy had kept his lunch to himself, for example, or if the disciples had figured that while the lunch was far too inadequate for the whole crowd, maybe it would have been enough for the 12 of them... If they had chosen not to share, perhaps there would have been no miracle to record that day.

I would suggest that this miracle is so important because it serves as a more general model of God's action in this world. Typically, and for the most part at least, when God wants something done in this world he chooses to do it with and through his people in the world. When Christ wanted to feed the crowd he first had his disciples take as many steps in that direction as they were able to do, and then he blessed their efforts and added his own power to them. On the occasion we read about, God added his power to the efforts of his people in a spectacular and extraordinary way. God does that when and how He sees fit to do it, but that is His business and His alone. Our part is to exhaust the resources available to us in pursuit of God's goals and purposes. When the disciples went through the countryside preaching the Kingdom, their part was to preach the message of repentance and (as Peter says in his epistle) to **"be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks the reason for the hope that they had. (1 Pet. 3:15)"**

God's part was, when and as He saw fit, to send the convicting power of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the listeners, and to draw them into new life. The part of the disciples was to show compassion for the sick and downtrodden; to lay hands on them and to anoint them with oil. God's part was, when and how He saw fit, to add the miracle of healing to the compassionate efforts of His people. In 1 Cor 3:6 the apostle Paul claims that **he planted seeds, Apollos watered them, but God gives the growth**. This is how God chooses to work among us, at least for the most part. As followers of Christ our hearts and minds have been transformed by our encounter with Him to regard our neighbours with compassion and generosity (even if they interrupt a precious fishing trip!). We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to do good works. Our part is to use all that has been given to us in service to God's purposes in this world, trusting that as we exhaust our efforts God will add his power, growth, and multiplication when and as He sees fit.

Here's one reason why this matters, and here is where the rubber meets the road. We find ourselves, right here and now, in the middle of a global pandemic. COVID-19 is shaping up to be one of the defining global events of our generation. Our immediate community in Whitehorse has been impacted far less severely than many other communities in the world, but we have been impacted. As an example, before the pandemic was even on the radar I recall discussing amongst ourselves the problems of social isolation and loneliness in our community. With the rise and dominance of "social media" folks don't interact with one another in the ways they used to, and many are finding it harder and harder to make deep and meaningful connections with other humans. Loneliness and isolation are deep evils that create serious suffering. The pandemic has made this worse, far worse for many people, especially the medically vulnerable among us. As we at RBC struggle to maintain our own small community and struggle to ensure that our own members find ways to stay connected and avoid loneliness, we **MUST** also turn our eye to those outside our church. This is a big problem and it may well be that the resources

we are able to gather in an attempt to address the problem are no more significant than 5 small loaves and two small fish when there is a crowd of many hungry thousands. What we learn from Jesus' feeding of the crowd is that the scope of the problem is irrelevant. What God expects from us is that we bring what we do have, that we make the efforts that we are able to make, and that we allow compassion for the great needs of others to interrupt our own plans and even our own legitimate needs. If we can do that, the rest lies with God, to bless, grow, multiply when and as He sees fit.

This applies to spreading the gospel, and it applies to healing the sick and caring for the downtrodden, all of which Jesus' disciples have been called to do through all of the many Ages of his church. When we spread the Kingdom by speaking to others of our faith we do exactly what Paul and Apollos took themselves to be doing: planting and watering seeds. Let us not forget, however, that the growth belongs to God. Your simple action of giving thanks over a meal that you share with a friend, or of lending a spiritually-themed book that you found inspiring, might seem like offering 5 loaves and two fish to a crowd of many thousands if you are thinking about winning many souls for Jesus. But that is your part in the divine action of salvation. The rest is up to God to give the growth. In caring for the sick and downtrodden the apostles of the First Century would anoint them with oil, in part out of a belief that it had medicinal purposes. In the 21st Century our part is to anoint the sick with acetaminophen or penicillin or cochlear implants if that lies within our ability; we do that with a cry to our Lord to bless and empower our efforts, even when they seem as insignificant as a boy's lunch before a crowd.

Children, this applies just as much to you as it does to anyone else. Recall that when Jesus wanted the people fed and the adult disciples were scurrying around worrying about how to pay for all the bread, it was a small boy who stepped up to offer his own lunch in service to the Lord.

On that day, God did something amazing with the boy's lunch. You, children, can teach US much about obedience and generosity. If you ever think of a way to do something kind for another person, don't let an adult tell you that it is a silly idea; who knows? Maybe will bless your efforts the way Jesus blessed that boy's lunch.

Two final points:

First, I have been encouraging a view of divine action as (normally and for the most part) *co-operative* action taken with his human followers. Just as Jesus fed the 5000 through and with the participation of his disciples, normally if God wants to accomplish a task in this world, he does so with and through his faithful people in the world. [As an aside, you should be asking *why* God would prefer to act that way, given that He doesn't *need* to. I might share some thoughts about that at another time if the opportunity arises, but please feel welcome to ask me about it if you are curious]. One consequence of this view is that we should rarely pray for God to do something in our own world, and then leave the matter in His hands. Assume that God's response to such prayers is often similar to Jesus' response to the disciples: "YOU give them something to eat". Rather, having asked God to add his blessing and power to your actions, pray for the result you want and then strive through your own activity to make it so. If God chooses to do something spectacular through your efforts, that is His business. At the same time, however, I am NOT encouraging the opposite extreme. Co-operative divine action necessarily involves God as well as man, and I am not suggesting that you act without prayer or without seeking the Lord's blessing upon your work. That would be like trying to feed a crowd of many thousands with 5 small loaves and two small fish. Let us not be so foolish.

Second, the Lord's blessing belongs to Him and he will enhance, grow, or empower your own effort when and as He sees fit. On the day we read about Jesus empowered the disciples' actions in an extraordinary and spectacular manner. He did that at a particular time and place and for a particular purpose; and that purpose belongs to him. Note, however, that the merit of the human side of the equation is not diminished when God declines to act in the same sort of spectacular and extraordinary manner. In particular, consider the boy's selfless action of saving some food and then offering it up to be distributed instead of keeping it for himself and those close to him. That action, assuming that it was made out of a shadow of the same sort of compassion for others that motivated Jesus that entire day would have been just as praiseworthy if Jesus had not worked any miracles that day. In our own lives, it is exceedingly rare for us to witness spectacular or miraculous results after taking the actions we have available to us in the service of the Kingdom. We should not be discouraged by this, and we should resist the temptation to think that we are doing something wrong. Our efforts are seen by God whether or not he multiplies them in ways we can recognize, and that should be enough for us.

BENEDICTION

Hebrews 13:20-21: **Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,**

21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.