

THE MIRACLE OF MULTIPLICATION

July 30, 2006

JOHN 6:1-15

In a day of rising food and gasoline prices, I have a lot of sympathy for families who have to try to make a little bit of money in the food budget go a long way. Now that it is just the two of us, our grocery bill is not quite so high, but when our children visit, I am reminded of how much it costs these days to feed the hungry multitude.

In our Scripture lesson today, the disciples faced a similar situation. But instead of eight or ten people, there were over five thousand people to feed. The crowd had spent the day by the Sea of Galilee with Jesus, listening to Him teach and preach. But now they were tired and hungry, and the nearest town was about two miles away, which sounds like a short distance to us. But remember that there were no cars to drive, and no fast food places, or supermarkets. And even if they could find enough food, where would they get enough money to buy it?

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE 5000 UNEXPECTED GUESTS FOR DINNER? Jesus said, *"How are we to buy bread so these people can eat?"* I can visualize the disciples digging into their pants pockets and pooling their money together. Maybe they came up with about \$20.00 or so. But how do you feed 5000 people with \$20.00?

Apparently this miracle had a great impact on the Gospel writers, because it is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. And if you read all four of the stories, you find out how the disciples proposed to solve the problem. *"We really can't do anything about this situation,"* they said. *"The only alternative is to send them away."* THE DISCIPLES WANTED TO RUN FROM THE PROBLEM, BUT JESUS WANTED TO SOLVE IT. So as the

disciples were about to send the people away, Jesus stopped them. *“Tell the people to sit down.”* ANDREW told Jesus that there was a boy who had brought five loaves and two fish. Now that's not very much to feed over 5000 hungry people, but Jesus said, *“Bring me what you have.”* And He took the five loaves and two fish, and held them in his hands and GAVE THANKS TO GOD for them, and gave them to the disciples to be handed out. And as the food was distributed, a miracle took place, for John's Gospel records that all had *“as much as they wanted,”* and after they had eaten their fill, the disciples gathered up the leftovers *“and there were twelve baskets left.”*

What do you believe happened that day? There are MANY THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS of this miracle. One interpretation sees it as a *SACRAMENT*. The breaking and distributing of the bread was Jesus introducing the Lord's Supper on a large scale. This interpretation emphasizes that the people were spiritually fed – their empty souls were filled.

Another theological interpretation reasons that the little boy's *GENEROSITY SET AN EXAMPLE OF SHARING* and others followed suit. Perhaps many people had brought food, but they were *AFRAID TO SHARE*. Some of the others had brought nothing, and there wouldn't be enough to go around; so they would just hold on to their meal and stop at a roadside park on the way back home and eat. But when this little boy, with a pure heart, brought all he had and gave it to feed the crowd, his sincerity and generosity moved the whole crowd to share what they had.

A third interpretation of this miracle reasons that it was the *REENACTMENT OF THE EXODUS 16 STORY* when God provided manna from heaven to feed the children of Israel in the wilderness. And now Jesus is repeating this miracle. It did not take the crowd long to

make the CONNECTION BETWEEN GOD AND JESUS, for they proclaimed Jesus *“the prophet who is to come into the world,”* and wanted to make him their Messiah King.

If you ask me what I believe about the feeding of the five thousand, I believe that it was a miracle of multiplication. AND THE GLORIOUS GOOD NEWS IS THAT THIS IS A MIRACLE THAT CAN BE REPEATED IN OUR LIVES AS WELL. With a careful reading of this story, we will find the necessary ingredients to make this miracle of multiplication a possibility in our own lives, and in the life of this church. And the Bible says that the FIRST THING JESUS DID to make this miracle of multiplication possible was that *HE GAVE THANKS*.

Jesus looked up to heaven and said a blessing. We don't know the exact prayer that Jesus prayer, but possibly it was the traditional blessing taught to every Jewish boy, *“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”* When you offer a blessing at meals, you are stating that you are interested in both the physical necessities and the spiritual things of life.

When I think of the feeding of the 5000, I sometimes picture another scene — the PILGRIMS who almost didn't survive when they came to America. Sickness, cold weather, and lack of food, wiped out over half of the Pilgrims that first year. But historians tell us that they kept their faith, and they gave thanks in all circumstances, and a miracle of multiplication took place. FROM THAT HUMBLE BEGINNING HAS COME THE ABUNDANCE OF AMERICA. From a little was made a lot. So the first step in making this miracle possible in our own lives is by beginning with a prayer of Thanksgiving. WITH AN AWARENESS OF AND A GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR WHAT WE HAVE, GIVE THANKS TO GOD.

I believe another condition that made this miracle possible was *A WILLINGNESS TO*

SHARE. Throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated that no one who was spiritually or physically hungry would be turned away. AS GOD'S GOOD AND FAITHFUL STEWARDS, we are asked to look at our own personal resources and the resources of this church. If shared, if turned over to God to distribute, those resources could meet the needs of many who are spiritually or physically hungry. Jesus is saying, "*Don't send them away. You feed them.*"

AND YOU KNOW, WILLINGNESS TO SHARE FREES YOU FROM A LOT OF NEEDLESS WORRY. When you have committed everything you have to God, you don't have to worry about it. You are freed from worrying whether you will lose it all or whether there will be enough to go around. You give, and you let God worry about the results!

In Israel, on the West Bank of the Sea of Galilee, there is a church named the *Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes* which was built in the third century. On the floor of the church is a mosaic depicting the feeding of the 5000. That early artist records the scene where the little boy gives his gift as the scene to remember. His willingness to share produced a miracle. IF WE WILL GIVE GOD WHAT WE HAVE, if we will turn over our loaves and fish to Him, GOD PROMISES US THAT THERE WILL BE ENOUGH TO GO AROUND.

The story also shows us that the miracle was brought about by Christ, but it was distributed through human hands. Jesus broke the bread and the fish and multiplied it, BUT THEN IT WAS SHARED WITH THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE HANDS OF THE DISCIPLES. Why didn't God just drop sack lunches from the sky for everybody? For one thing the people may have been afraid to eat it. But passing through human hands, it became more like a family meal. IT MADE THE PEOPLE FEEL THAT NOT ONLY DID GOD CARE, BUT

OTHERS CARED TOO.

When we become channels through which the power and compassion of Christ can flow, we become sensitized to the needs of others. We experience deep, genuine compassion and love for people. When I have prayer with people in the hospital, I nearly always pray to bless the doctors and nurses and other hospital staff who administer the healing miracles of God. Many of the miracles of God are sent through other people. The needs of humanity can and shall be met if we will LOOK TO HEAVEN FOR OUR BLESSING and if we will become willing channels to distribute God's blessing and grace to others.

One more observation from this story. THERE IS NOTHING STINGY ABOUT THE WAY GOD PROVIDES FOR US. John records that after the miracle of multiplication took place, all were sufficiently fed and satisfied. There was enough left over that they took up twelve baskets full. KEEP FOR YOURSELF AND YOU WILL HAVE ENOUGH FOR ONE PERSON; BUT SHARE AND YOU HAVE ENOUGH FOR MULTITUDES.

That is what grace is all about. Grace means that God gives us more than enough. The Bible states in Isaiah 55 that *"He will abundantly pardon."* The 23rd Psalm reminds us that not only does God fill our cup, but *"our cup runneth over."* Luke 6:38 says *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."* And John's Gospel says that not only does Christ give us life, but he gives it to us *"more abundantly."* Abundance – that is the way of God's love and grace.

What does this story say in summary? It says that IF YOU WAIT AND HOLD BACK YOUR GIVING, OTHERS WILL DO THE SAME. It says that EVEN A LITTLE BOY, or we could say a youth or an older person CAN BE AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD'S GRACE AND LOVE. What it takes is a willingness to be used by God. It says that IF WE WILL BE

FAITHFUL IN GIVING JESUS WHAT WE HAVE, even though we may think it is small, GOD WILL MULTIPLY our time, our talents, our money and IT WILL BE SUFFICIENT. The story says that if you and I as disciples will LET HIM USE OUR HANDS TO SHARE AND TO SATISFY THE NEEDS OF THE HUNGRY — physically and spiritually hungry — THERE WILL BE ENOUGH TO GET THE JOB DONE. Look to God in expectancy and faith! Little is much when God is in it!