

FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND: YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT A Theological Reflection by the Rev. Elizabeth December¹

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "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." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:13-21)

This Gospel story invites us to look at the resources we already have and to consider offering them on behalf of a needy world. It calls us to remember and to anticipate, to stand in the story, looking back and looking forward to instances of divine nourishment. We can look back to the manna in the wilderness and forward to the Lord's Supper, re-experiencing who God has been in the past, anticipating who God will be and what God will do in the future.


It's a reminder that the cupboards are never bare in heaven, and we can all enjoy God's abundance here and now. What seems critical about this story is that there is at least one version of it in each of the Gospels. And in all of the synoptic accounts, certainly in Matthew's, Jesus is clear that the disciples should be involved in the feeding: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

God invites us to eat—a miracle. But God also invites us to serve.

What an empowering mindset this story offers; one that rebukes the imposed limits of deficit, need, scarcity, and lack—and asks us to look more closely at what we have and hold together. It is as if Jesus is sharing a message akin to a certain kind of asset-based community fellowship.

What is it to consider the miracle of this moment as also taking seriously a mindset of the resources, gifts, talents, and people already in community, with an approach that is based in

¹ Inspired by Alyce McKenzie's reflection on Matthew 14:13-21, available at: <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/07/you-want-us-to-do-what-alyce-mckenzie-07-25-2011>



place and starts with relationships and relationality, that works inclusively to make sure that everyone is involved, and no one is left to the periphery?

What would it look like to start with the theology of shared meals inside and outside the walls of the church? To learn to look to the lessons of being present to where we are, with the baseline assumption that there is already enough? To be a body of Christ that magnifies and multiplies the resources of what we've already been blessed with from his hand to begin with?

Thomas G. Long, in commenting on this passage, says, "With desperate and hungry people camped all over the church lawn, Jesus turns, then and now, to his followers and speaks what is either a cruel joke or lavish divine humor: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (Mt 14:16). The disciples, fully aware that their own resources are not up to the magnitude of the need, (Mt 14:17) nonetheless trust that the jest is a divine one and obey Jesus." (Long, 165) "You give them something to eat," "Don't wait for someone else to do it." "Don't pretend you don't have the time or the skills or the resources to do God's bidding in the world." "Don't pretend you're not qualified or capable." "Don't put it off for another day or time or moment when it might be more convenient for you." "Don't even wait for me to do it in your place." "YOU give them something to eat."

A few weeks ago, the Rev. Canon Hilary Murray approached individuals when she learned about the needs of a young woman in her community who is expecting her first baby. She assessed the specific needs for this young woman and what options were available to provide her support. Canon Hilary then reached out to her network. Because of her heart for the idea of filling that need, Canon Hilary was successful in obtaining support for this young woman. Through her role as the Cornerstone chaplain, Canon Hilary has been an important source of giving this young woman something to eat.

CONSIDER ways each of us might feed someone, too? Maybe it's that coworker you know could use a hand or some encouragement... Maybe it's a neighbour who's having a hard time... Maybe it's something around your church – helping with Sunday school, sharing a meal, starting a new small group of your own this fall. Let's not wait for someone else to do it. Let's not pretend we aren't capable or qualified or called, even, to respond to the needs around us. And let's not wait for Jesus to do it all by himself.

Let's think about our mission here as congregations and as individual followers of Christ. Let's hear Jesus' command to give the world something to eat. And let's realize that we have all we need to make that happen – that because of God's love for us, we are called and capable of doing the work of Christ in and for the sake of the world – and that when we do, there will be more than enough of that love and grace and hope to go around – with leftovers besides.