

“Food For Thought”

John 6:1-14

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This morning our attention is drawn to a story that can be found in all four gospels. This alone tells us how important it must be. For this event to make it through the final cut in every gospel sets it apart for closer scrutiny, which has occurred down through the years.

In this particular account, this story is used to introduce a new unit of material. Just as the first section opened with the miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, so this unit begins with the miraculous feeding of the masses.

What these two stories have in common is that Jesus took the ordinary and turned it into something special. It appears the writer is urging his readers to follow Jesus' example.

I'm confident you know this story. Jesus and his disciples went to what they thought was a secluded place around the Sea of Galilee to get some rest. The demands of the people were already taking a toll on them, and they needed some time away to replenish their spirits and bodies.

People came looking for them, however, and walked along the shore until they found them. Jesus could not turn them away and continued teaching late into the afternoon.

As the day drew to a close, Jesus knew the people were hungry. He singled Philip out and asked him where food could be found to feed them. After all, Philip was from that area and would know the shop keepers.

It is obvious from Philip's response that he was shocked, confused and in no mood to order take-out. "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," he replied, and he was right.

I cannot be too hard on Philip. I am fairly certain I would have responded in a similar fashion. Like Philip, I would have run out of answers and compassion.

You know what happened next. Andrew brought a little boy to Jesus who was willing to hand over his lunch, which consisted of five loaves of barley bread and two fish. Andrew had no idea how this meager amount could be used to feed this large crowd of hungry people, but that did not keep him from presenting it to Jesus. At least it was something to work with, as futile as it seemed.

Jesus instructed the people to sit on the grass in groups of fifty, and after they did, he blessed the boy's lunch. No doubt he thanked God for this little boy's generosity and asked God to use it to feed His hungry children, which God did. Before long, everyone had eaten, and there was food leftover.

So impressed were the people that day, they said of Jesus, "Surely, this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

As I mentioned earlier, this is one of the most familiar stories in scripture because it is in all four gospels. Evidently, those who wrote and compiled the gospels felt it conveyed a message they did not want overlooked.

What do you think that message was? I gave this a lot of thought last week, and here's what I think.

People of faith don't ignore human needs, spiritual or physical, and people of faith don't walk away from big problems, no matter how daunting they appear. If they do, what good is their faith? What kind of impact will they have on the world?

What are the two most striking features of this story? It is the size of the crowd, over five thousand people, and the size of that little boy's lunch, five barley loaves and two fish.

The contrast is undeniable, and the challenge is overwhelming. This is a no brainer. No amount of compassion was going to bridge this gap, as the disciples clearly believed.

What did the disciples want to do? They made that very clear. "Send the people away," they told Jesus.

Why did they say this? They were exhausted. Compassion fatigue had overtaken them.

Remember, this was supposed to be a quiet retreat for them after returning from their first mission trip. They came to this remote section on the shores of the Sea of Galilee to rest and recharge. They had been with these people all day. Now, it was their time.

Besides, there was no way they could feed this many people. As Philip reminded Jesus, even if he knew where to purchase food, they did not have enough money to buy food to feed everyone.

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Surely, Jesus would agree, but he didn't. He was unwilling to throw his hands up in the air and give up like the disciples.

Like the prophets before him, Jesus identified a pressing need and then asked God's people what they were going to do about it. However, for Jesus indifference was not an option.

This was why Jesus responded favorably to Andrew when he brought him a little boy with an uneaten lunch of five loaves and two fish. Jesus had what he needed to feed the people before sending them home.

Can you identify with Philip and the disciples? What challenge are you facing today which has stopped you in your tracks? Are you to the point you are ready to throw your hands up in the air and walk away?

Before you do, let this story speak to you. And what does it say? **People of faith don't walk away from needs, their own or others, and they accept challenges others walk away from.**

They always have. They always must.

How do you tackle the problems and challenges other people ignore or abandon? According to this story, there are two things you must do.

Work with God. This was what Jesus did when he took that little boy's meager provisions and asked God to bless them.

When facing a big challenge, it is human nature to discount what we have and echo Andrew's words when he looked at the loaves and fishes, "But what are they among so many people?" Rarely do we feel we have all we need to succeed, and we're probably right.

However, when we offer God what we have and ask Him to bless it, we become a channel of blessing through which God can work. A little becomes a lot when God is in it, as an old song reminds us. Look what God did that day with just five barley loaves and two fish.

I encourage you to look in your basket this morning to see what you have. Don't get discouraged because it may be small, but rejoice over the fact you have something to offer.

Give God what you have. Allow God to use it and to work through you to tackle even the biggest challenge. Never underestimate what God can do with what you make available to him.

Out of all the people in the crowd that day, who was the unlikeliest person to be used by God to feed all those people? It had to be that little boy. We know from the contents of his lunch he came from a very poor family. Only the poorest of the poor ate barley bread. It was held in contempt by anyone able to afford better.

However, he was the one who made it possible for everyone to eat, as unlikely as that seems. What if he had not been willing to share his food? Would the people have gone home hungry? It appears they would have.

I wonder how many turned Andrew down before he found this willing lad. How many laughed and told Andrew he had to be kidding or held tightly to what they had to insure they would have enough nourishment for the journey home?

How many times have you walked away from a problem because you felt you had too little to offer? Don't do that again.

Offer what you have to God, and ask God to bless it. In God's eyes, there is no gift too small to matter, and there is no viable excuse for refusing to make it available.

In addition to working with God, work with others. Feeding the people that day was not the result of one person's deeds, but many. A little boy offered his lunch. Andrew brought it to Jesus. The disciples helped the people to sit in groups of fifty, and they gathered up the leftovers so they would not go to waste. It is easy to see this was a collaborative effort.

The teamwork may not have stopped there, though. According to some scholars, especially my friend and Mercer professor, Dr. Colin Harris, everyone present that day may have collaborated to make this miracle happen.

Instead of Jesus miraculously multiplying the fish and loaves, is it possible Jesus used the little boy's generosity to inspire others to do the same. After all, in that culture no one left home without food if he or she was going to be gone for any length of time.

Granted, people were gone longer that day than expected because they had to travel a great distance around the lake to find Jesus, and the hour was late. No doubt many of them,

like this little boy, had some food left though. Could it be that Jesus encouraged the people to sit in small groups and place before them the food they had left? Sounds reasonable to me.

Could it also be possible there was actually enough food for all of them, with plenty leftover? Sure, especially in this gospel where Jesus solves problems in non-traditional ways.

I know this interpretation is not as sensational as Jesus mass producing thousands of meals, but I agree with Dr. Harris that it merits consideration. If this is what happened that afternoon, it could have been Jesus' most profound and unforgettable lesson of the day.

What was that? **If we share with our neighbors like we did today, no one will ever go hungry!**

Furthermore, this 'miracle of sharing' could also have been used to teach the disciples that big problems are solved by pooling resources and working with neighbors. When people work with God and others, all things are possible! All things! No personal or global problem is too intimidating to be solved.

What is the biggest challenge you are facing today? Will you apply the lessons from this familiar story to that challenge?

As a person of faith, will you roll up your sleeves and tackle life's biggest challenges instead of walking away? Will you offer God what you have and ask Him to bless it? Will you reach out to those around you and work with them? Will you share what you have with those who are struggling and those who are trying to help them?

I hope so.