

Bring Them Here to Me
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 31, 2021-PM Service
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Matthew 14:13-21

Do you get the sense that the disciples are irritated with the crowd, and maybe even irritated with Jesus? When they got on the boat with Jesus, they were imagining a nice weekend away from the busyness and pressure of ministry. They had been putting in overtime with Jesus: traveling all over Galilee, standing beside him as he healed people and confronted authorities and preached sermons. There was never a dull moment with Jesus and never a moment's rest. Things had been particularly hairy lately. Jesus' run-ins with authority had become more and more frequent. The Pharisees had accused Jesus of being in league with the devil, Jesus had accused the Pharisees of being a corrupt generation, Herod had executed John the Baptist; it seemed like a good time to lay low. And so when Jesus announced they would be headed to a deserted place for a little R&R, the disciples were quietly excited. No more needy crowds pawing at Jesus. No more angry Pharisees shouting threats and accusations, just a weekend by the seashore. Maybe a little camping, some fishing, talking at night around the campfire. It would just be the 13 of them talking, and they would have Jesus to themselves. It would be wonderful.

But of course the deserted place, their little vacation ground, turned out not to be so deserted: there were thousands of people there when they arrived. A huge crowd had gathered and they all looked needy. When they saw the crowds, I imagine Peter and Andrew were secretly whispering under their breath: 'Let's keep going, let's keep going! Let's not go ashore!' But Jesus, does what you would expect, he has compassion on this great mass of broken humanity, and he stops the boat and gets out and waves in the crowd. He looks into the worried faces. He listens to all the sad stories. He heals the diseases.

The disciples put up with this until evening, at which time they're getting really antsy, really eager to get this ministry thing over with, really eager to be alone, and so one of them-probably Peter-sidles up to Jesus, he clears his throat and he says, "Excuse me, master? 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." All the other disciples stood behind Peter nodding their heads in agreement. But Jesus says "They don't need to leave! You give them something to eat." And then their frustration spills out. "Lord, you have got to be kidding! Look at these people! Look at them all! This is too much for us. There are thousands of them, all of them needy and there are only twelve of us, we're already tired, and all we have are these five loaves and two fish!!! Lord, we don't really have enough to feed the 13 of us! This little stash isn't enough for 13 grown men and you want us to feed this mob!?"

Do you sympathize with the disciples? I do. We all do. What the disciples encounter here is just what most of us encounter every single day: small resources for unlimited needs. The work of our lives and the work of the kingdom is never ending. It seems like there are 5000 things to do. And all we have to meet these challenges is fives loaves of and a couple of fish. You wake up in the morning and you are already feeling stretched thin. You're already saying to yourself, 'Lord I couldn't possibly handle one more thing today,' and then, WHAM, there isn't just one more thing, there are five more things. And when that sort of thing happens, just like the disciples in this story, we get annoyed. Human nature in those situations is to get grumpy and selfish: "make these people go away and send the riff raff home! We need this food for

ourselves!” When we are overwhelmed, our gut instinct, our default response is to get irritable and to pull in our resources.

But in this passage, Jesus wants to change our default response. He wants to amend our gut instinct. He wants to teach us a new rhythm. When we feel overburdened, instead of becoming inward and annoyed, Jesus wants us to teach us something about worship. This passage teaches us something important about the importance and the power of worship. Worship? Why worship? Jesus isn't worshipping. He's in a Galilean field! There's no synagogue around. Why should I think there's a lesson about worship in this passage? Well, certainly, on one level, this is a miracle that Jesus does to feed a hungry crowd, but like so many of his miracles, Jesus doesn't just do them to help the hurting person in front of him, he also does them to teach something to his disciples. Another way to say this: Jesus healings aren't just miracles that heal a sick person, they are signs to teach us. And I think the teaching part, the sign part, of this miracle means to say something about worship.

That's particularly clear in the way Jesus handles the bread and the fish when he receives them. Jesus took the food, he blessed them, he broke them, and he gave them to his disciples. Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave. That's the four-fold language of the Lord's Supper. If you were to go to any of the synoptic Gospels-Matthew, Mark and Luke-you would find that the action of Jesus at the Lord's Supper is described precisely the same way as the sharing of the bread here: he took bread he blessed, he broke, and he gave. This same rhythm shows up in the Emmaus road story. The same rhythm shows up in the story of the feeding of the 4000. As I mentioned on Easter, this is Lord's Supper language, these are the words of institution as laid out by Paul in Corinthians, and as spoken by ministers all over the world when communion is celebrated. Anytime you hear that rhythm in scripture, that's a signal that the Lord's Supper is being suggested.

So, following Eugene Peterson and the great Anglican liturgical scholar Gregory Dix, I would like to suggest to you that Jesus does on the Galilean shore with the 12 disciples and their meager gift of 5 loaves and two fish is also what he does when we come to worship in this place, at this table. Every Sunday, as we worship, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives.

First, Jesus takes what we have. Jesus asks the disciples to give him what they have. They think it's not enough, but he says, “bring the 5 loaves and the 2 fish to me,” and they do. We come to worship tired and we bring to Jesus ourselves and the work of our week. And we're a little embarrassed, because it's not much. We're also reluctant to give it because it's all we have. Because it's meager, our instinct is to hoard and hang on. But Jesus suggests something different. Bring whatever you have to me. In our worship that's what we do. We bring our tired selves to the Lord and we give ourselves to him. Liturgically we make that offering in different ways: We do that just by showing up. Coming to this place and sitting down in the pew is a form of self-offering. We also offer ourselves in the language of our prayers, we offer ourselves in the language of our songs; we also offer ourselves in the giving of the offering. We give Jesus our little loaf, and even though it's not much, Jesus accepts us. Jesus takes what we have to give.

And he doesn't just take what we offer; he blesses it. This has to do with the Spirit of his taking. He doesn't receive our offering with a sigh and say: “Oh well, if this is the best you've got, I guess I'll take it.” He doesn't say, “Five loaves and two fish? are you kidding me? Is that all?” He receives us with affection, he takes our small selves in his hands and he blesses. This also happens in our services. At the beginning of the service, after we have sung our first hymn of praise, after we have made the first offering of ourselves to God, the first words out of my mouth is: “Grace, mercy, and peace to you.” Those are the words of greeting. Following an

ancient liturgical pattern, at the beginning of the service, the first Word of the Lord to you people is not a word of inquiry (what have you done this week?!), or a word of rebuke (you are not worthy to be in my presence); it's a word of blessing: "Grace and peace to you. You are my beloved! Grace and peace. I am so happy that you are here with me." It's a reminder that our lives are not rooted on our worth, but on the freely given love of our God. Jesus receives our gift and he blesses it.

But he also breaks us. This is the hard part. Because we don't want to be broken; we want to be strong and put-together. Our world trains us to hold ourselves together. In our daily life we do everything we can not to look broken, not to fall apart. In our daily life we work at keeping it all together because we've been trained to think that it's not the broken people who make it, it's the together people who make it. But in worship we let Jesus break us. That happens in the prayer of confession. Lord, I have sinned again. That happens in the pastoral prayer. Lord, I am overwhelmed, it's all falling to pieces, and I need your help. In those liturgical moments, we let Jesus break us. Just like a gardener breaks and turns over the hard soil of her vegetable garden in the spring time so that it is ready to receive the seed and the rain, so Jesus breaks up the hardened ground of our life and makes us ready for new life so that something new and better can grow in us. A broken spirit and a contrite heart the Lord will not despise; he will use it as the starting point for a new and a right spirit. Jesus breaks us.

Jesus takes and blesses, he breaks, and then he gives. Jesus gives us back what we gave to him, only it's not the same as what we gave. It's more. It's multiplied. It's stronger, deeper, more abundant. When the disciples give Jesus their small offering, it's not even enough to feed them. When Jesus gives it back, it's not just enough, it's more than enough for 5000 people. Jesus gives the offering back to the disciples, and they turn around and go to the 5000 needy people who are waiting for them, and they find that in Christ, their little offering is able to accomplish more than they asked or imagined. That's what happens to us every week in worship. The pattern is exactly the same: We give God our little bit and he multiplies it. After blessing and breaking, through the mysterious working of his Spirit, Jesus gives ourselves back and we have strength again to go out to the world and share what we have with the needy masses out there, and God does more with that than you can ever know.

It happens every week right here! The miracle of multiplication happens every week, right here at LaGrave! We give to Jesus, and Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives. We give him our little offering, he blesses it, he breaks it, and then he multiplies it, and sends us back out into the world. And by this weekly worship miracle, somehow we find that we have bread for ourselves, and bread to share with the world.

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