

Small Things That Satisfy
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Mark 6:30-44

All four of them. All four gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—include this miracle in their book. In fact, except for Jesus’ resurrection, it is the only miracle included in all four gospel accounts. Why is that? If we were able to invite the gospel writers here tonight—to have them step up to the lectern to give their reason for including the story in their book—the one who might be the most interesting to hear would be John, the one who repeated only about 10% of material found in the other gospels. That means the vast majority of the content in his book is unique to John only, and yet he, too, includes the feeding of the 5,000. Some commentators believe it’s included because it shows Jesus meeting both people’s physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. Others think, and I’m inclined to agree that this story’s importance is found in the way it leads to the table, which was such a central part of worship life in the early church.

The story in Mark’s gospel begins with a conversation—a conversation between the disciples and their teacher as they gather around him. “Jesus, we have been preaching the good news just like you told us to, and people are leaving their sinful ways. We saw others who were sick, many from disease, so we anointed them with oil, and they were healed. We were even able to drive out demons from some people.” Knowing how busy they had been, and that they did not have a chance to eat, Jesus says to the disciples, “Come with me. Let us go to a quiet place and get some rest.”

A great idea indeed. “Finally, the opportunity to take a break,” the disciples possibly mutter. So much, however, for the best-laid plans. By the time Jesus and the disciples arrive on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a crowd has assembled to see Jesus. This happens many times in Jesus’ ministry, and this time is no exception. Jesus takes one look at the mass of people, and he has compassion on them. They are sheep without a shepherd. He sees their spiritual need, so he begins to teach.

We can almost hear the disciples begin to grumble amongst themselves as the scene unfolds. “What is he doing? What about our time of rest? He knew we were hungry.”

No one in the crowd meant to be out there that long, but that’s how it should be, listening to Jesus—as if time didn’t exist. The breaking point comes as the day draws closer to its end, when the disciples stay silent no longer: “This is a remote place, Jesus, a wilderness. Send them away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy something to eat.” A reasonable suggestion? Not really. Where is a crowd that large going to find something to eat in nearby towns at that time of day? The situation is beyond human possibilities, and the disciples are focused on just one thing: “Get them out of here, Jesus. Just get rid of them.” That’s their thinking—thinking that is in sharp contrast to Jesus’ compassion for the people.

Of course, the plot gets even better with what happens next, with Jesus’ next idea, his idea of how to meet the people’s physical needs. He looks at the disciples, and he says, “*You* feed them.”

“What?” the disciples respond. “Us? With what? We would have to work for over six months to earn enough money to buy bread for that crowd to be able to eat.” Jesus’ line of thinking is beyond their comprehension, and their tone is downright disrespectful. We read later in verse 52 that their hearts were *hardened*. That’s the Greek word *poroo*, which means literally to ‘petrify, to turn to stone, to become callous.’ How did they become like this? Weren’t these the same twelve who went out to the villages doing the Lord’s work, following his instructions to take nothing with them, and yet God provided for them and blessed their work abundantly? Had they forgotten so quickly what God can do? Some have labeled the disciples as *slow learners*, perhaps rightfully so. Or, were they responding this way because they were fatigued and in need of rest, in need of sabbath? Whatever the reason, the disciples see Jesus’ instructions as completely impossible. In their human thinking, there is no way his plan can work.

At times our thinking is limited as well. I read once of a small boy who had a toy fire truck, complete with sirens and flashing red lights. It eventually stopped working, however, and without seeking an adult’s help, the boy went to throw it in the trash. He thought the toy was finished, done for. He didn’t see how it could work once again. His dad caught him in time, and with a grab into a drawer full of batteries, the fire truck was brought back to life again.

Often we struggle with situations that are far more serious than broken toys that need new batteries. One of the things I often hear as I go about visiting people is their concern for children and grandchildren who are no longer attending church or who have walked away from the faith. This is a valid reason for concern. Recently I heard of a study from Eastern Illinois University which found that 44% of Generation Z—ages 18-to-25—are either atheists, agnostics, or followers of no particular religion. Even more troubling is that only 41% of that generation describe themselves as Christians, meaning non-religious people outnumber Christians in that generation for the first time ever. The study also points out that Gen Z is getting more non-religious over time.

News like this should drive us to our knees, and for many, it does. One of our members shared with me that she has a prayer list of people who are wandering, who have left the faith, and each time she hears of one, she adds that person to the list. What an example for us to be people who pray in faith, who proclaim the words from Psalm 86:10 as we did tonight, “Lord, you are great and do marvelous deeds. You alone are God!”

But let’s be honest, oftentimes we hear news like the statistics I quoted, and we feel overwhelmed. If we quote Psalm 86:10 at all, we do it with far less confidence, perhaps it comes out as just a whimper. Satan places doubt in our minds and unbelief in our hearts. As a result, we, like the disciples, don’t see how God can possibly intervene to solve the problem, to bring about the change that’s needed. We become, as James 1:6 says, like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

As the disciples stand there, filled with their own doubt, they hear Jesus ask, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” They return, likely with more sarcasm in their voice: “Only five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus. That’s all there is.”

Jesus instructs them to have the crowd sit down on the green grass, a place of refuge and rest in the midst of the wilderness, much like the image we hear in Psalm 23. The crowd sits in groups of hundreds and fifties. Jesus, meanwhile, takes the five loaves and the two fish, looks up to heaven, gives thanks, and breaks the bread. He gives the broken loaves and the two fish to the disciples to distribute to the people, like a shepherd feeding his flock.

The conversation amidst the disciples probably went something like this: “This is never going to work. What is he thinking? Look at the number of people out there. There’s probably more than 10,000 people when you include the women and children.” Their thoughts, though, likely shift as the meal progresses, and the food continues to be plentiful. “Andrew,” Philip says, “have you run out yet?” “Not me,” Andrew replies, “each time I bring food to another group, there’s still enough. I can’t believe it!” Peter chimes in, “This crowd isn’t just snacking on the bread and fish; they’re being filled! They’re being completely satisfied.”

Afterwards the disciples turn into the clean-up crew, and each one is able to collect a basketful of leftovers—broken pieces of bread and fish—a sign, as it turns out, that there was enough to go around...or, there became enough to go around.

In this story, Jesus calls the disciples to be active participants in the miracle, not passive like they were in previous ones, and he asks them to come with everything they have. It’s a small amount indeed—the staples of a peasant’s diet—common, ordinary things—but with Jesus, all they have is enough. It’s sufficient.

In our lives, just like with the disciples, God often uses small ordinary things to accomplish his mission, to bring fulfillment and satisfaction. At a previous church where I served as the worship director, I met a dear couple the first Sunday I was there. They introduced themselves to me before the evening service. “He’s Henry, and I’m Henrietta.” With a twinkle in her eye, she looked at me and said, “You won’t forget our names.” They were right, nor would I forget the kindness they showed me over the next 2 ½ years. Even after leaving the position at the church, I was able to visit them at their house on multiple occasions, first to see both of them, and then after she died, to just see Henry. They had told me how she would play the piano, and they would sing together in the living room, a past time they both loved. Sometimes, from the way they described it, they would almost play a “name that tune” activity. She would play a song and then say to him, “Do you know that one?” It seems he usually did.

When scheduling a visit with Henry one time, I asked what he thought about me playing the piano and us singing together. He was all for it. By the time I arrived, he had the songs picked out, the hymnbooks ready to go, and the papers in the correct pages. We sang a number of favorites, but then when I swung around on the piano bench and looked at Henry, I saw that there were tears in his eyes. I wondered if I had made a mistake, if the singing idea had been a bad idea, but then I realized these were tears of joy, tears that flowed from the good

memories Henry had of his wife, who he missed so much. He thanked me multiple times, and asked if we could do it again the next time I came.

For those of you who have visited people—perhaps you’re a pastor or retired pastor, a pastoral care elder, a former deaconess or as we now call them at LaGrave, pastoral care assistants—you know that what you receive from those visits is usually far greater than what you give. Often God provides more blessings to the visitor than to the one being visited. How is that possible that God uses a small amount of time—usually just one hour out of a month—to provide such fulfillment? Just like the disciples in tonight’s text, we can’t fully comprehend, can’t fully wrap our minds around how God can use such small things to make a difference in his kingdom and in the lives of his people.

Tonight we come to the Lord’s Table, and as we do, we have the privilege to remember Christ’s sacrifice. We have the privilege to commune with him, to feel his presence. We have the privilege to be spiritually fed, to be satisfied, and to receive God’s grace. And God does all this, with a small piece of bread and a small amount of juice. It’s hard to understand how he does this by his Spirit, but by faith we believe what the Belgic Confession says...that Jesus Christ has given us this Holy Supper *to nourish and to sustain* those who are grafted into his family, his church. Just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink them in our mouths, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the body and blood of Christ, our only Savior (article 35). God satisfies us in an amazing way by using simple things at his table.

This evening and in the days ahead, may we marvel and give thanks at how God uses things that seem small—some loaves of bread and a few fish, a visit to a homebound person, the elements for communion--to bring blessing and satisfaction to his people. But may we also be willing participants, those who come to Jesus with everything we have, however insignificant that may seem. As Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” Amen.

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