

FIVE PLUS TWO

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 14:13-21

Five loaves, two fish, five thousand fed, twelve baskets left over.

It's a miracle!

And that is what we often call it, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

I think scripture and tradition tell us that they were five small barley loaves, and the fish were probably a little bigger than a couple of sardines, certainly no bigger than a smoked mullet. From that small amount, five thousand men, plus women and children were fed.

Matthew omits a detail that John includes in his gospel, which is that a young boy, a lad, a teenager, volunteered his five loaves and two fish to feed the crowd.

But still: what a miracle.

Now old William Barclay, in his commentary on this passage, notes that Jesus was not into big, showy, productions. Most of His miracles were individual miracles: He healed people on a one to one basis. He really didn't care how the crowd reacted. In fact, many of the times that Jesus healed someone, because of when He did it (the Sabbath day) the Pharisees, the scribes, the religious authorities of the day, were offended by what He did.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it was a public miracle, but Jesus did not call forth all of the dead in the graveyard, just Lazarus.

Here, Jesus fed the crowd. But how did it come to pass that five loaves and two fish fed five thousand with twelve baskets left over?

Well, my first thought was that they thought it was communion, and only took a little pinch.

I'm always amazed when we have communion here in this church. I swear, more bread comes back to the table than went out.

So if they thought that bread and fish was a sacramental meal, and each one took just a smidgen...But no, Jesus hadn't instituted the sacrament of the Lord's supper yet, and bread and fish has never been a sacrament, so that won't work.

The simplest answer is that Jesus miraculously multiplied the loaves and fish, that He simply increased them in abundance, so that there was enough to feed the multitude, with leftovers.

There are a couple of comparable or parallel miracles.

The first miracle of Jesus was the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. That was pretty spectacular, but notice that Jesus asks and receives no recognition for the miracle, that the host of the banquet is praised for bringing out the best wine at the end of the evening's festivities. (See John 2)

But Jesus didn't take the dregs, the last few drops of wine in the pitchers and jars and increase them to overflowing. Instead, he took jars of water and turned them into wine.

Water into wine. Not increasing a few drops to hundreds of gallons.

When Jesus was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He fasted for forty days and forty nights. And the scripture tells us that He was hungry. Well, I guess so. I don't think I can go forty minutes without a snack, much less forty days and forty nights without a bite. Maybe if I could do that, I could lose the forty or fifty pounds I need to lose.

When Jesus had finished the fast, the very first temptation that Satan throws at Him is food. There are rocks there in the desert, rocks that are shaped like loaves of bread.

Satan says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:3-4)

Jesus could have turned the stones on that mountainside where the five thousand were gathered into loaves of bread, but He didn't.

The text is strangely silent in all four gospels. Five loaves, two fish, five thousand fed, twelve baskets left over. The facts are consistent, but the details obscure.

The most common explanation would be something like, "Jesus went 'presto, chango,' and there was enough bread to go around."

When God feeds the people in the Old Testament, there is none of this "presto, chango" stuff. God sends manna, but it appears in the morning, vanishes in the afternoon, and can't be kept overnight. God sends quail in the evening, but only enough for that evening's meal, and both the manna and the quail can be described

as natural phenomena.

Then there was the time that the prophet Elijah dwelled in the land of Sidon, at Zarepath, with a widow. When he arrived, she had only a handful of meal and a little oil in a jug, and she was going to make a little cake out of it for her and her son, and then they were going to starve to death. Instead, the prophet asked her to share with him, and the jar of meal and the jug of oil were not empty until the Lord sent rain upon the earth to end the famine.

Now there is a case of a miraculous increase, but there is another miracle here: the woman shared what little she had with another, and she was blessed in the sharing.

William Barclay has this to say about what happened when there were five loaves, two fish, five thousand, and twelve baskets left over:

“Picture the scene. There is a crowd. It is late; they are hungry. But was it really likely that the vast majority of that crowd would set out across the lake without any food at all? Would they not take something with them, however little? Now it was evening and they were hungry. *But they were also selfish.* And no one would produce what he had lest he had to share it and he himself had not enough. Rather than share their scanty provisions they kept them (to themselves). Then Jesus took the lead. Such as He and His disciples had He began to share with a blessing and an invitation and a smile. And thereupon all began to share, and before they knew what was happening, there was enough and more than enough for all.

“If that happened, this was not the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes; it was the miracle of the changing of selfish people into generous people at the touch of Christ. It was the miracle of the birth of love in grudging hearts. It was the miracle of changed men and women with something of Christ in them to banish the selfishness of their hearts. It that be so, then in the realest sense Christ fed them with Himself, and sent His spirit to dwell within their hearts.

“It does not matter how we understand this miracle. One thing is sure—when Christ is there the weary find rest and the hungry soul is fed.” *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, pages 114-115.*

What does this mean to us today? Is there any lesson for us to learn?

Well, I think one lesson we need to learn is that there is no reason for any child anywhere in the world to go to bed hungry at night, or to live in a state of starvation.

There is enough food for everyone, if those who have will share with those who have not.

Most of us, and I am chief among these sinners, eat too much, weigh too much, have too much food. If we ate sensibly, and gave what we saved on the food we don't eat to the Presbyterian Hunger Program, or any other church-related hunger ministry, to our food pantry here at the church, how great an impact would that have on hunger in the world?

The second lesson is so simple it defies explanation: we must all learn to share.

If the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the President, had learned how to share, how to play well with others, do you think our nation would be in the financial crisis that we are in, that all of our retirement funds in Social Security would be in jeopardy?

Someone once said that Christian economics is one of those oxymorons, a contradiction in terms like jumbo shrimp, or fresh frozen, or an entertaining sermon.

But what the world needs today is Christian economics, economics based on the principles of the life of Jesus Christ, where all is shared with those who have need, and where a rich man has no more influence in the halls of power than a beggar.

But that's another sermon for another Sunday. Let's pray.

Lord, help us to take our loaves and fish and share them with those around us, so that all may be fed. In your name, Jesus, we pray. Amen.