

Five Loaves and Two Fish

In the name of him whose steadfast love endures forever, dear friends in Christ: The feeding of the 5000 is one of the few miracles of Jesus that is recorded by all four of the evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It tells us that each writer thought it was an important part of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. More to the point, it tells us that God the Holy Spirit who inspired them to write what they did thought it was an important enough event to retell to us four times. It's like he highlighted and underscored it for us. And that means we really ought to sit up and take notice. There's something important here we are to know.

Ah, but wouldn't you like to have been there to witness this miracle? Imagine yourself in the place of one of the disciples. After a long day of assisting Jesus while he taught and healed people in this vast crowd, you're tired. You want Jesus to send them away so they can take care of themselves. But no, Jesus tells you it's *your* job to feed them. With what? Really Jesus? All we've got are five little pita loaves and a couple of fish. It's not even enough for us!

That'll do nicely, says Jesus. Hand them over to me. He lifts his eyes to heaven, says a blessing of thanks over them, and then places in your basket, let's see, divide by twelve, a little less than half of loaf and one sixth of a fish: mere fragments of a meal. Then he says, "Why are you just standing there staring into your basket? Get out there and feed those people".

We know from other accounts that Jesus had the people recline in groups of fifty. So, now you're waking over to your first group thinking, well, this won't take long. First person gets it all. And then won't I look stupid? But when you get there, you look down again and you're shocked to discover that your basket is full. You start distributing. And no matter how many times you put your hand in there, the basket never empties. You feel like Santa Claus. Why, you feel like Congress giving away money it doesn't have. Since the figure of 5000 doesn't include women and children, we can conservatively estimate that the total number is upwards of 20,000, which means you feed over 1000 people all by yourself. Everyone eats and is satisfied. You're hungry too, so you eat your fill. And somehow I've got to believe that it tasted especially good; *really* hit the spot. And then when it's all done, you gather up the remaining fragments and bring your full basket back to Jesus and set it down there with the eleven others at his feet. Really, wouldn't you like to have been there to see this happen? Or if not that, wouldn't you like to be on hand to see it happen again?

Hold that thought. Few things I want to point out. This, St. Matthew's account of the miracle, is the shortest of the four. But he does give us one detail the others don't. It's right there at the beginning where it says that hearing about the death of John, Jesus withdrew to a desolate place. Mark, in his Gospel, stresses how Jesus and his disciples were under a ton of pressure due to the constant press of the crowds that kept coming. They needed a break and withdrew for a short vacation – and didn't get it because the crowds followed them. But Matthew wants us to know that it was specifically the death of John that made Jesus want to be alone. It's not hard to guess why. Jesus had praised John as the greatest of the prophets. John had baptized him at the beginning of his public ministry. No doubt they talked and became friends, colleagues in the same ministry. Jesus needed time to mourn. Beyond that, Jesus knew that John's relatively quick and painless death by beheading was the precursor to his own, which would be anything but quick and painless. John's death was a grim reminder to Jesus of the fate that awaited him.

Next, notice what it is that compels Jesus to deal with this crowd. He had sought a getaway, a brief respite from the demands of so many needy people, both for himself and for his disciples. He also needed time to mourn for John. They thought they had made a clean escape when they got in the boat and sailed away from Capernaum before dawn, but someone must have seen them and spread the word. So it happens that as they land the boat on a beach far from any city or town, they look up and see this vast mob approaching. How tempting it must have been to shove off the beach and sail away someplace else. I have no doubt that's what the disciples wanted to do. But not Jesus. He couldn't do it. The text says he had compassion on the people in this crowd. The Greek word Matthew uses is even stronger. It's more like "gut-wrenched", a deep sense of care and empathy that you feel in the pit of your stomach. These people had walked all the way out here because they needed Jesus. They wanted to see him, to hear him, to be healed by him; he couldn't let them down. In the mind of Jesus the needs of others far outweigh his own. That's just who he is.

I'd also like to point out some of the Old Testament imagery in this account. This feeding of a multitude in a desolate place reminds us of the Lord feeding Israel in the desert with manna those forty years they spent out there. And that makes sense. I mean it wasn't Moses who led the people and fed them all that time. It was the Lord in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night who led and fed them. It was the pre-incarnate Christ. And here he is doing it again in the flesh. Also consider the setting. We're in a grassy place along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. How can you read this account and not think of the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." Beautiful.

Finally, looking at just the surface level meaning of the text, take note that Jesus does not interact directly with the people who are fed by him in this miracle. He feeds them through his disciples. They're the ones who do the work of distributing and gathering. And this is the key to getting past the surface level into the deeper theological meaning of the account. You see, this miracle recorded in all four Gospels is a parable or picture of the Church. I mean sure, we see Jesus providing food for people and it's very nice that he does that. But we all know he came to do more than provide supper for hungry people. He came to feed souls with the Bread of Life from heaven that those who eat of it may live forever.

It's the numbers that give it away: five loaves, two fish, 5000 people, and twelve baskets of leftovers. These numbers are all theologically loaded with meaning. Start with five. Ask any first century Jew what five stood for and he'd answer right away, "It's the Torah, the five books of Moses"; and by extension the entire Word of God. And so it makes sense that there are five loaves of bread because there is close connection in Scripture between bread, that which sustains earthly life, and God's Word, that which sustains eternal life. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

So, if the five loaves picture God's Word, what shall we make of the two fish? Let's go with the two "fleshly and physical" elements that accompany God's Word: the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The picture here is Christ handing over to his disciples the Word and Sacraments that they will use to feed God's people. That the total of five and two is seven is significant too, because seven is the number associated with rest, with God's promise, with grace and forgiveness, and with the Church. It's a very "Gospel-y" number.

Okay, how about the 5000? Don't you find it interesting that all four evangelists use that number, but only counted the men? Wouldn't it be more impressive to record the total number who were fed? "The feeding of the 20,000", or whatever it was. Yes, that would be more grand; but it would miss the theological point. Five is God's Word and a thousand has to do with

fullness or completion, so let me suggest that 5000 people represent the whole people of the Book of Scripture, all those who hear the Word of God.

And finally we've got 12 baskets of leftovers returned to Jesus. Twelve usually stands for the number of God's people as in the 12 tribes of Israel or the 12 Apostles. It's the number of the saved or the redeemed.

So, overall picture: Jesus takes the Word and Sacraments, puts them into the hands of the disciples who go forth using them to feed his Church. These means of grace do their work. All are fed and satisfied. And returned to the Lord are his own: the faithful remnant, the 12 tribes of new Israel, the people of God in Christ Jesus who inherit eternal life.

I asked before, wouldn't you like to be on hand to see this miracle take place? I see it happen at least once a week. So does every other faithful preacher of God's Word. And so do you, though you might not be aware of it. It begins early in the week; sometimes on Sunday afternoon. I start with everything I've got: the five loaves of God's Word and the two small fish of his Sacraments. Jesus points at you, the people of the Book of Scripture, and he says to me, "You give them something to eat." There were times in the past when I wondered how it could be done with so little. But by now I've seen the miracle take place so many times that I know it will happen again. Anyway, Jesus gives me a just a small portion of one of the loaves: the readings you see on the back of your bulletin: mere fragments of a meal. It doesn't look like much. But then like the disciples in the text, all I do is the leg work. It's Jesus who blesses it and multiplies it to feed a multitude in such a way that it restores their souls. Oh, and in the process, I get fed too.

And let's not forget the two fish that complete the meal. We don't often have a Baptism, but when we do we combine the Words of Jesus with a bit of water and what do we get? Spiritual rebirth, the washing of regeneration, the entry of God's Holy Spirit into the heart, mind, and soul of a sinner making them a faithful child of God. And even when we don't have a Baptism we return to our own Baptisms in Confession and Absolution. We all confess our sins and Jesus wipes them away. So also in the Lord's Supper: the Words of Jesus, morsels of bread, a little wine, and now by miraculous means Jesus declares to you "This is my body, this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins".

Week in, week out, and often in between, here and in countless other places throughout the world the feeding of the 5000 continues to happen. Needy sinners gather to see Jesus, to hear him, to be healed by him, and he has compassion on them. Through his servants he feeds his people with only five loaves and two fish. They eat and are filled. And returned to Jesus are the faithful remnant, the redeemed, those whom he is rescuing out of this world and keeping for the life of the world to come. Even as the Lord Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." So may we ever hunger to be filled. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!