

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 14:13-21
"You Give Them Something to Eat"

Here we have the famous story called "the feeding of the 5,000." I'm not sure why it is called that because the final sentence of the story states: "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." With the women and children there must have been at least 15,000 people.

The point is that many people were fed that day. There are a number of ways of interpreting the story.

First, it's a miracle. Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and turns them into enough food to feed the masses. It is thought that since Jesus is God incarnate the act is well within the realm of possibility. In real terms this is an easy solution. If we could perform miracles we could feed the world today in a snap.

Second, it is thought that Jesus began the feeding with the little he had and all who had food with them shared their food and everyone was fed to abundance. Someone told me this week: "Thank God women were in the crowd because they brought food."

Both interpretations are compelling. Miracles are mysteries and some say they happen all the time. Others say that that the miracle came in the immediate willingness of the people to share their food.

There's a third way of understanding the text. It sees the story as a metaphor of empowerment. This might sound strange because Jesus says to his disciples "you give them something to eat" and then he feeds them.

Since we are this side of the story the message is that we can do almost anything *with* Jesus.

"Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."

We are empowered when we take on the strong, faithful and giving spirit of Jesus. With this we can do anything. Since the story is about feeding, we can feed the world with no problem. I know I cannot do this on my own, but I can as I appropriate Jesus in my life and incorporate the Body of Christ in my actions.

Once a year in ritualistic fashion during the worship service I receive a basket from the Mission Outreach chair Debbie Lundberg. In this basket lies letters she has gathered and those sent from absent members of the church, including my letter. The letters are blessed and sent to our representatives in Congress to support a bill for the care of the hungry and poor.

The program is spearheaded by Bread for the World whose most recent managing director and acting president, the Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald, has just become president of San Francisco Theological Seminary. Individuals from churches all over the United States write letters like us. Almost without fail the legislation is approved and millions of dollars feed the poor and hungry.

We feed the world when we work with the Body of Christ, every Christian in the world, to influence those in power. We engage in local actions like our monthly food contribution to Mill Street.

We feed the world when we dialogue with religious communities around the world and encourage each other to be faithful to the true tenants of our faith.

We feed the hungry when we challenge those who claim no faith to live up to the best of their humanness. I have friends who make a point of telling me that they do not adhere to any religion but they are humanists. They express concern for the poor. We work with them.

People free themselves to feed the poor when they sublimate greed and share what they have.

Empowered Christians can change the world. If it were not so we would not have stories like the so-called feeding of the 5,000.

Needless to say, there are many other overwhelming situations in our world that need to be fed and satisfied.

We carry our own crosses such as problematic and seemingly impossible family situations, or personal health issues, or major decisions at home or on the job, or other family and work-related issues.

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We fully appraise the situation and look up to heaven and ask God to bless the little we have. Have we asked God to be with us and to help us in our situations of need? Have

we broken the loaves, in other words, taken the first few steps? That's the hardest part, those first few steps.

I wouldn't be with you today if I did not take those first few steps. I was an installed pastor for eight years in Calistoga and things were going well when I decided to move on and embark on interim ministry training and open myself to a new call.

A close, confiding friend asked why I would leave the security of my present job for an unknown future. I was in a small, rural church and I guess I shouldn't have expected much. But God doesn't work that way. I had work experience in two other churches, medium-sized and large. I looked to heaven, blessed what I had and trusted that God was going before me. God provided.

I was interviewed by the interim calling committee at Old First Presbyterian Church at the corner of Van Ness and Sacramento in San Francisco and I got the job. I was told much later by the chair of the committee, a professor at UCSF, that they took a chance on me (I guess they also followed the faith of the feeding story) and the match turned out to be marvelous. I was thrown into the deep end but I soon surfaced and we had a wonderful partnership in ministry.

God blesses what we bless in God's name and as difficult as it seems at first God continues to bless us.

Then there are crosses of the world. Just to think about them makes us feel somewhat helpless. The breakdown in Somalia and the resultant starvation of people seems intractable. The Israeli/Palestinian situation drags on, so do the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The budget debate in Washington over these past weeks tries our patience. These and many other situations – all areas that affect our lives – are overwhelming.

We could wish them away and hope they disappear. They will not go away. Instead, we hear Jesus' words: "You give them something to eat." I imagine the disciples' cynical dismay when they see Jesus about to feed the masses with five loaves and two fish.

When I grew up in apartheid South Africa we never thought there would be independence and the vote for all in our lifetime. As a young Christian student I added my small contribution with thousands of others to the pot for liberation. We took to God the little we had, asked God to bless our work and did what we could to change things.

Our drops of water made a stream. The many streams turned into a river that became wider and wider until it was wide and strong enough to change South Africa into a free, democratic and multi-racial society. There are new struggles and new feedings and God is in those as well.

Feeding comes in many forms and we can expect to be fed by God when we look to heaven, bless the little we have and begin the journey to God's new horizon for ourselves and our world.

There's a bonus. It's the collection at the end of the biblical feeding story. "And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full." Expect the total fulfillment of what you are looking for and more and gather the abundance that's left over and be thankful and share that as well. Amen.