

The Bare Necessities

August 2, 2020

UMCG

Are you aware that the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 is the one and only miracle story found in all four Gospels? That's pretty amazing! And are you aware that each of the Gospels takes the story in a slightly different direction. (1) Students of the Bible, for example, note that Mark's story of the feeding seems to take on a more *political tone than the others. Luke, on the other hand, takes the story in a more pastoral direction. Luke presents Jesus as the ideal example for church leaders and pastors responsible for the feeding and care of their congregations. John, not surprisingly, uses his account of the Feeding of the 5,000 to take us in a spiritual direction. For John, Jesus, the Bread of Life, is the one who meets our spiritual needs.

What then of Matthew? What is he doing with his account of the feeding of the multitude? NT scholar Douglas Hare points out that "the emphasis in Matthew is not on our spiritual, but our physical needs. Bread and fish constitute the basic ingredients of a peasant's meal in Galilee. Jesus' miracle provides no cooked dishes, no luxurious fruit, no wine! Instead, it underscores the fact that God's providential care can be counted on to supply the bare necessities of life." In other words, God answers – literally - those who pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." (2)

Later in this service Pastor Becky will be leading us in the celebration of an Agape Meal or Love Feast—an ancient church tradition revived by John Wesley, founder of Methodism. And we'll hear the song sung so often around Methodist tables before meals—"Be Present at Our Table Lord." And as we do so, we will remember the different emphases the Gospels make in their various approaches to Jesus's meal, the feeding of the 5,000. We'll remind ourselves that Jesus is indeed present with us, no matter what our socio-economic and political situation is. (Mark's emphasis.) We'll remember that Jesus is present in our church as we receive pastoral care, and offer care to one another. (Luke's emphasis.) We'll experience the presence of Jesus, the Bread of Life, who sustains us spiritually and emotionally (John's emphasis.) and who promises to meet our basic needs—those "bare necessities" of life. (Matthew's emphasis.)

While each Gospel story has a different emphasis, there are some common threads that run through all four accounts. All four include hungry multitudes. All four include Jesus's disciples who don't seem to know what to do, and "act out," in the midst of a hunger crisis. All four include Jesus himself, who works *through* his disciples, to meet the needs of the crowd. As we hear this story in our own context...today...who do we identify with? Can you identify with those in the crowd, the multitude? Stuck, as it were, in the wilderness, in need of food, comfort and support? What wilderness experience might you be going through in your life right now? What are you hungering for? And who, or what, are you looking for to feed your needs?

Safe to say, we are all stuck in this Covid crisis - this Covid wilderness – locally and globally. And it's taking a toll on us – not just physically, but mentally, emotionally and spiritually as well. Thus, some of us are hungering for comfort in the midst of sorrow and grief as some of us have, perhaps, lost a family member or loved one to the virus. (I lost an Aunt to Covid recently in Ohio.) Some of us are hungering for calmness in the midst chaos, of a sense of safety in the midst of fear. Fear of contracting the virus ourselves, or our family members or friends getting it. Some of us may have been hard hit financially and have financial fears. Others fear the upcoming school year, of having our children return to school, whether that's pre-school, grade school, Jr. High, High School or college. Or perhaps we're fearful that our kids *won't* return to school, and we'll have to home school them while juggling a host of other roles and responsibilities. Think of our teachers and school administrators. I recently spoke with a teacher who expressed tremendous fear of returning to the classroom. Spiritually, many of us are in need of...are hungering for...peace and hope and joy.

Meanwhile, we find ourselves in other wildernesses – for example, coming to grips with the reality of structural racism, white privilege and implicit bias. Personally, I'm encouraged with the many individuals and several groups here at church (such as Spirits & Studies and Spirited Women) who are intentionally reading and discussing a wide array of books on racism. What are we hungering for? To do justice? To love kindness? To walk humbly with God and repent of our sin?

In the midst of bitter political division and culture wars...what are we hungering for? Are we hungering for truth telling? The purging of corruption? The pursuit of justice and peace making? Are we hungering for forgiveness and the restoration of trust? (I would be remiss to not mention John Lewis, Civil Rights Activist and Congressman, who was laid to rest a few day ago. Congressman Lewis embodied these very values, and serves as an enduring role model for all of us.) What are you hungering for in your life today? And who are you turning to feed your hunger? Are you looking to yourself alone? Or are you reaching out to family, to trusted friends, to your faith community, and to the Lord?

What about the disciples in today's story? Can you identify with them? Feeling frustrated! (My word, they're supposed to be on break, on vacation with Jesus, and here they're surrounded by a clamoring crowd!) So I ask: Are you angry with the multitude of disruptions in your life...the loss of normal living? Feeling overwhelmed? Wishing it would all just go away? Wishing you could just go away...walk away from it all? When Jesus's disciples, in utter frustration, demand that Jesus send the hungry crowds away to feed themselves...what did Jesus say to them? "You feed them!"

Like those first disciples, we too ask, "What do I, what do we, have to offer in this situation?" Like them, we too worry, "Do I, do we, have enough?" To meet our own needs? The needs of others in our lives? And like those first disciples, Jesus comes to us today, in this story, and says..."What? "Use what you have! Use what's already in your hand!" Is it a paltry five loaves and two fish? Well...bring them to Jesus! Bring what you have. And guess what. When you do...he'll use both what you have, no matter how small—or great, and he'll use you. Jesus will work through you to bless others...to meet the needs of others. And as you offer what you have, and do what you can to meet the needs of others...the Lord will meet your needs as well! Amen.

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1. Douglas Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation Bible Commentary*. John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 165-167; Robert Tannehill, *Luke: Abingdon N.T. Commentaries*. Abingdon Press, 1996, pp. 154-156.
2. Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, p. 166.

*Our adult Sunday School class asked how the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark's story took a political direction. See attached article by Ernst van Eck, NT scholar.

