

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Daily Bread

There were three mice who died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked them how they liked being in heaven. The mice said that it was OK, but since they had such short legs, it was hard for them to get around because heaven was so big. So St. Peter told them that he thought he would be able to help them. After a little while, an angel came to the mice and gave each of them a set of roller skates. Right away, the mice put the roller skates on, and they could zip around heaven, really enjoying themselves.

A little later, a certain cat died and went to heaven. After a couple of days, St. Peter stopped by and asked the cat how he liked being in heaven. The cat answered by saying, "Oh, boy, do I like being in heaven! I'm having a great time and I'm really enjoying myself. And most of all, I love those meals on wheels."¹

Sometimes the best laid plans of mice and me—and even archangels—fall short and go astray, and the very thing we're doing to help people backfires on us. That seems to be the case in our text this morning as the Messiah seems to have made a mess of things.

The master and his disciples had been far too excited about proclaiming the kingdom to thousands to bother with much planning: there were no Port-A-Potties; there were no crowd-control measures, no beverage or snacks offered to the multitudes, not even a single vending

1 <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-or18-fuller.php>

machine. And it was getting late. Some of the folks who'd come to hear Jesus had traveled tens of miles on foot and would be forced to return home dehydrated and hungry.

There was a small-scale humanitarian crisis brewing. Within hours, the casualties of poor planning would be strewn about on the side of the road, too tired and hungry to make it home. These crowds need food. The disciples, now worried, tell Jesus that he needs to dismiss these crowds and send them into the villages to buy food.

Jesus seems strangely unmoved. He refuses to dismiss them, and instead, he commands the disciples to give the people food. "You feed them," he says. The disciples search and find nothing more than two fish and five rolls, hardly enough for the disciples themselves, much less a great crowd in excess of 5,000.

Nevertheless, the disciples begin to move through the crowd, dolling out small portions at first, then bolder helpings. They must have expected to instantly run out of food, yet the more they gave out, the more they had to give.

Some have suggested that in fact, when persons in the crowds witnessed the disciples sharing their meager vittles with strangers, they followed suit and added to the food their own provisions, which they'd been hoarding and hiding. There is nothing of the sort in the text itself. The text tells the story of a divine act of abundance—a miraculous provision of sustenance for a hungry multitude.

One might image, that to feed such a massive crowds, the disciples themselves could have used some roller skates to zip through the country side, dishing out fish sandwiches with amazed and perplexed expressions on their faces.

After all was said and done, there were 12 large baskets of leftovers. God supplied more than was needed. Divine abundance; miraculous overflow.

Before every meal, our family says that popular children's blessing: "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food. By your hands we are fed, thank you for our daily bread."

A few years ago, Zach began to call dinner rolls "daily bread" and he would say things like, "Could you please pass me some of that daily bread." We thought it was adorably cute how literally he had taken the words of that simple prayer.

But, maybe we should also be taking the words of that prayer literally. We think our bread comes from Wal-mart or Kroger or McDades. Perhaps, Zach is exactly right, our dinner rolls come from the hand of God, and we should be truly thankful for our daily bread.

Lately in the news, we've been hearing about a horrible drought in the horn of Africa that threatens to destroy populations in the millions—men, women, and children—particularly children. The images on television have been horrifying.

Honestly, I simply can't watch it. I feel like a horrible, callous, uncaring coward, but I have to turn off the television. Images of little children dying of starvation, it's simple too much.

Honestly, it's easy to put the whole matter out of your mind. Turn the channel watch an old rerun of I Love Lucy, and life returns to normal. We live on the other side of the world, and if we don't want to care, we don't have to.

But if you're like me and can't bear to see those images on TV, at least you can read about the problem. Or, in this case, hear me preach about it. Here's how a recent NPR article reported on the issue:

“Deprived of food long enough, the bodies of starving people break down muscle tissue to keep vital organs functioning. Diarrhea and skin rashes are common, as are fungal and other infections. As the stomach wastes away, lethargy sets in and the feeling of hunger abates. Movement becomes immensely painful. Often it is dehydration that finally causes death, because the perception of thirst and a starving person's ability to get water are both radically diminished.”

Already thousands have met this fate, thousands of men, women, and children, and ten of thousands will likely die in the coming months. Over three million are currently at risk. Tragically, the global response has been painfully slow. First, there's donor fatigue. So very many mass tragedies have caused the global community to work together to respond. Second, the severity of the drought and the speed of its devastation have taken many by surprise. Third, there is difficulty in getting the food to the people who need it and fear that the food will fall into the hands of Islamic radicals in the South, who are more than happy to keep the food for themselves and let their neighbors die.

The disaster in the making is one of both natural and manmade causes. Drought, poor roads, and poverty cause much misery, but starvation in the modern world is almost always a form of murder—starvation is the result of deliberate acts on the part of a government to fail to provide food to those who are dying. Food is available and can be transported to those in need—if and only if governments allow it to happen. Mass starvation, sadly, is often fueled by genocide, and those responsible should be held accountable for crimes against humanity.

Thankfully, famines are becoming very rare. The last official famine declared by the UN was in 1984—almost 30 years ago. Globalization, infrastructure, and a robust and large number of agencies and non-profits dedicated to feeding the hungry of this earth, have made starvation on a mass scale quite rare. We live in a world with an abundance of food. When a people are

hungry, there is more than enough food to feed them, plus with have the planes, trains, and trucks to deliver the food; the problem is often the government and the soldier that would prevent to food from being delivered.

In democratic and free societies, starvation is very rare, but where democracy and human rights are ignored, famine is a real threat. In the late 1990's, somewhere between 600,000 and 1 million died in North Korea because of famine and the repugnant intransience of its dictator. Every death was needless.²

One thing all Christians agree on, liberal and conservative, is that we are called to feed hungry folks, and Christian organizations of every stripe and in virtually every denomination exist to respond to hunger in the world. Generosity flows in abundance.

When we hear our Lord say, "You give them something to eat," we take and give. We have little control how our generosity is received. It could be stolen, squandered, misused, spent, wasted. Like those little roller skates for those little mice, our best plans may end up backfiring on us. Yet we are called to give, and give with generosity—even lavish compassion. Because we have abundance, we are called to give in abundance.

And sometimes, even when our gift seems meager and small, God multiplies it in the most surprising and wondrous ways, and sometimes we actually help people, real people in real problems.

Last week, we got a strange visitor to the church. He said his name was "Ricco" (or something like that) and that he had a tithe for the church. None of the ladies wanted to open the door for him, so jaded and suspicious are we. A stranger who wants to give the church money—impossible.

So I went to the door. As soon as I opened to the door, a man was there with cash in his hand. He said he was a student and didn't attend church much, but once month he'd pick a church and randomly and give his tithe.

He was willing to trust us with his tithe. It wasn't a great deal of money—it wasn't much more than a couple of fish and 5 little loaves of bread, but he trusts us with his meager provisions. And I believe that with God, this small gift can be merged with our gifts, and out of the abundance of God's grace, men, women, and children can be saved from starvation. With his small gift, maybe a family will be saved, maybe a village, maybe tens of thousands.

² <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/27/138738773/foreign-policy-murder-by-starvation>

Jesus calls us to feed the hungry of the earth—let us not hesitate and let us trust God to multiply our small gifts into lavish abundance for the hurting of the earth.

Amen.