

“The Next Big Thing”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ When they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish’” (Mark 6:38).

One of the most distinctive aspects of our culture today is the great emphasis that we place on celebrities. That was brought home to me this week in article in the *New York Times* by Tom Friedman, who noted that when Oprah Winfrey chose Elie Wiesel’s book, *Night*, as a main selection for her book club, Wiesel’s book immediately found its way into one of the top ten best sellers on the Amazon.com list of best sellers. More surprisingly, however, was the fact that a bizarre book mentioned by Osama bin Laden in his most recent video also appeared in the top ten best sellers. Friedman went on to point out that many people in the Arab world believe that Osama bin Laden and his Egyptian sidekick have lost a lot of their power. The terrorist network, Al Qaeda, seems to have morphed. More and more power seems to be moving toward other Arab terrorists. Friedman speculated that Osama and his Egyptian colleague are today more like aging rock stars, trying to recycle copies of their top hits and hoping for a gig in Las Vegas. I can see it now. In ten years when you visit Nevada there will be billboards which say, “Now appearing in Las Vegas: Barry Manilow at Caesar’s Palace; also appearing Osama bin Laden at the Kit Kat Club.

I.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the ministry of Jesus is the emphasis that Jesus placed on the importance of little things. He found more beauty in the “lily of the field” than in Solomon’s temple with all its gold and splendor. He saw more faith and trust in a small child than in the long prayers and phylacteries of the Scribes and Pharisees. He saw more worth in a “widow’s mite” than in the entire splendid gifts placed in the temple’s treasury.

Nowhere is this emphasis on the importance of little things more evident than in the “miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.”

There is something fundamental about this miracle story. It is found in all four of the gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9; 10-17; John 6:1-13). Each of the gospel writers tells this story with a slightly different emphasis. For John the breaking of the bread and the language used is reminiscent of the Last Supper. It is also John’s gospel that introduces the small boy with the five barley loaves and two fishes. But Mark’s story is likely the oldest of the four and if the tradition of Peter’s involvement with Mark’s gospel is valid, then there is an eyewitness account here that places this miracle at the very heart of the gospel.

II.

The “feeding of the five thousand” includes the characteristic elements of a miracle story: 1) problem (verse 35-40; 2) solution (verses 41-42); 3) evidence that the miracle has occurred (verses 43-44).

The story bears a certain simplicity. Jesus and his disciples have moved out to a lonely place. A crowd has followed them. Suddenly, the daylight is fading and the disciples realize that the crowd will soon be hungry and there is nothing with which to feed them. Like many of us, the disciples want to get rid of the problem by dispersing the crowd. The disciples said, “Send them away.” Jesus took a different approach. He said, “Give them something to eat.” So when they collected all they could find, they had only five loaves and two fish. So Jesus had the disciples sit the crowd into groups of hundreds and fifties. Then he took the five loaves and two fish. Then after Jesus had blessed the loaves and fish, he broke the bread, gave it to the disciples and all five thousand were fed. Moreover, when all had eaten their fill, the disciples collected twelve baskets of bread.

Now this story, like so many in the New Testament, has created a certain embarrassment in the church. Commentators, through the years, have suggested a number of ways to explain this story. For some, it is a simple exaggeration. Five loaves and two fish can’t feed five thousand people. Others have sought a more rational explanation. Some commentators suggest that there was a cave nearby and that Jesus’ disciples prepared the food there and gave it to the crowd. Others saw the elements of the Last Supper read back into the early ministry of Jesus.

But the New Testament does not share our embarrassment about this miracle. Jesus was “the bread of life.” He had the power to provide food for the hungry and that is what he did.

III.

One of the things that this miracle makes clear is the power of Jesus to take something small and to make out of it something great.

This past week our church was one of the sponsors for a special program on WSOC-TV introducing the Dead Sea Scroll exhibit, which will come to Discovery Place in Charlotte in several weeks. Many regard the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls as the most significant archaeological discovery of the Twentieth Century.

The discovery of these ancient scrolls began in 1947 when a shepherd boy found a cave near the ancient city of Qumran, in the Judean desert near the Dead Sea. Seeing a small hole in the cave, this shepherd threw a small rock into the cave. He heard it strike something with a somewhat strange sound. Later a group of shepherds explored the cave. In the cave they found a group of ancient jars containing old manuscripts that they could not read. Some of the scrolls found their way to the local market where they were sold as odd artifacts. It was not until several years later that some of the scrolls made their way to the American Institute of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. When scholars examined the scrolls, they were incredulous. They contained some of the oldest manuscripts of parts of the Old Testament, including the book of Isaiah and Habakkuk. In addition, they told the story of an ancient Jewish sect, the Essenes, who had moved from Jerusalem to the shores of the Dead Sea to separate themselves from what they believed to be a corrupt world. Today, they represent one of the great discoveries of our lifetimes.

So often in life, it is the little things that count. Recently, I had the opportunity to see the movie “Ray,” that depicted the life of Ray Charles played by Jamie Foxx. Ray Charles was born in the state of Georgia. As a black singer, blind from an early age, Charles fought many obstacles in becoming a very powerful singer and songwriter. In the 1960s Ray Charles played a number of concerts in his home state of Georgia. In those days concerts in Georgia were segregated and blacks were not allowed entrance. When Ray Charles was challenged about this kind of segregation, he first argued that this was simply the way things were. Later, he changed his mind and refused to play segregated concerts. For that the State Legislature of Georgia banned him from ever returning to his home state. Shortly before his death, Ray Charles was invited to Albany, Georgia, welcomed by the Legislature, which adopted “Georgia On My Mind” as the official state song.

So much of the ministry of Jesus was rooted in small things: a cup of cold water, a lost sheep, five loaves and two fish. Someone once described Jesus’ relationship to people as a small boat circling an island. He had the uncanny ability to circle in on a person’s life until he found the cause of their illness. For a Samaritan Woman it was sexual laxity. For a tax collector named Zaccheus it was corruption and dishonesty. For a rich young ruler it was a devotion to religion, but the inability to really let go.

The common thread, however, that ran through all of his encounters was that the people who met him were changed. He was the “bread of life” that gave people the very thing they needed to live.

IV.

Then, too, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand reminds us of the difference that one life can make. In the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in John’s gospel the person who provided the five loaves and two fish was a small boy. Mark’s gospel does not tell us exactly how and where the disciples found this small amount of food but someone had to have provided it.

Sometimes we think that because we are only one person, we cannot make a difference, but we should always be reminded that one person can make a difference. Some years ago Hannah Arendt wrote a powerful little book on Adolph Eichmann entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Study in the Banality of Evil*. Adolph Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem for his crimes against the Jews in World War II. One of the powerful aspects of Arendt’s work was her description of Eichmann. He seemed so insipid and harmless as he sat in that glass room in the courthouse, polishing his glasses. Eichmann’s role in the Third Reich was not grotesque. He was simply in charge of making sure that the trains carrying the Jews to the death camps ran on time. In fact, that was his defense. He was not evil. He was just carrying out his job.

In many ways, Adolph Eichmann reminds me of so many of us. We don’t want to be troublemakers. We don’t want to disturb the peace. We try to get to work on time and keep our noses clean. And yet I wonder how much evil in the world is done by people who are simply unwilling to speak out in the face of evil.

In Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, there is a scene in which these two friends of Hamlet sense they are moving from their fate to their destiny. Unknown to them they are carrying with them a letter to the King of England that demands their execution. At one point, sensing that something is terribly wrong, Rosencrantz turns to his young friend and says, “There must have been a moment in the beginning when we could have said ‘No,’ but somehow we have missed it.”

I wonder how many of us will come to a point in our lives when we realize we could have said “No”-- no to the wrong job, no to the wrong habit, no to the wrong relationship-- but somehow we miss.

In John Baillie’s little book *A Diary of Private Prayer*, there is a prayer that says, “Lord, when you call me to pass through some deep valley, do not allow me to think that there is a way around.”

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.
Amen.