

That Sounds Familiar: Loaves and Fishes

Mark 6:30-44, Mark 8:1-10

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In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way – and some of them have come from a great distance.”

His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd.

They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.

They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

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Our summer theme for worship is “That Sounds Familiar.”

The idea is to read and reflect upon stories in the Bible that many of us know so well that we might miss the point if we aren’t careful.

This morning our theme applies not only to us, but also to Jesus’ disciples.

It was when I was in seminary that I realized that there was not one, but two feeding stories in Mark’s gospel. There are only 49 verses that separate the first story in chapter six (which Katelyn read) from the second story in chapter 8. I have always thought it was rather strange to include two stories that were so similar. After all, Mark is the shortest of the gospels. When you read about Jesus’ life in Matthew, or Luke, or John you find that there is a lot of Jesus’ life and ministry that Mark’s fails to include – so, I wonder, why would Mark take up precious space by including a story that the reader just heard 49 verses before?

While similar, perhaps there is significance in the slight differences between the two stories. The first story is about feeding the 5,000; in the second 4,000 are fed. In the first story, the crowd appears to be all men; the second is a more inclusive bunch... comprised, not of men, but of “people.” There are less loaves and fishes (five and two) in the first story than the second (where there are seven loaves and a “few” fish).

Still, I wonder why Mark felt it was important to include two stories.

The more I have studied, and read, and prayed about this, the more I am convinced that the reason Mark includes two stories that are so similar is because the Jesus’ disciples – then, and now – just have a hard time believing that God will provide for their needs.

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Scripture tells us that the same 12 disciples were there for both feedings. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Simon, Judas and Judas. These are the twelve disciples – the original followers of Jesus.

They were there when Jesus fed the 5,000.
They wondered where the food was going to come from.
How could Jesus feed so many people with only five loaves and two fish?
But when they served the food – all ate and all were filled.
And there were twelve baskets left over.

49 verses later, there they were again. Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James, Simon, Judas and Judas.

They were with Jesus in the desert.
There were 4,000 people.
All they had were seven loaves of bread and a few small fish.

Doesn’t that sound familiar?

You might think this would have reminded them of that amazing miracle Jesus performed just a couple of chapters ago. Maybe to at least one of the twelve disciples?? But no. They still couldn’t believe it. They asked, “how can we feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

I can image Jesus looking up at his father in heaven and thinking, “really? These are the people you have given me to be my followers?”

At the heart of the disciples’ response – both times – is the question – “do we have enough?”

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Does that sound familiar?

How many times have you wondered if there was enough?

Last weekend, Lindsey, the kids and I were in Richmond, Virginia, where I officiated a wedding and then preached at the congregation I first served. It was in Richmond, with me fresh out of seminary and Lindsey fresh into seminary, where we bought our first house.

Last weekend we wanted to drive by it to show the kids. When we stopped in front of the house I looked at Lindsey and she looked at me and we shared a knowing smile. I really do think they make postage stamps bigger than that house.

Its hard to explain to your kids what it means to live off of a starter-salary and tax refunds in 900 square feet with a baby and graduate student and a dog – but what I will tell them if and when it is their turn to live that life is that it is enough.

And I'll be preaching to myself – because a few kids and almost four time the square footage later, with a competitive salary and a working spouse – I am still wrestling with the same question... “do we have enough?”

Does that sound familiar?

In early March of this year I stood in a one-room church in Ignacio Zaragoza on the Yucatan Peninsula and preached on these two feeding stories from Mark's gospel. I was part of a mission team from our church that spent a week with our partners in Accion Ministries at VIM – or in English, the Mayan Children's Village – where 30 children live during the week when school is in session. Were it not for VIM, which is supported by the generosity of this congregation, those children's education would stop in late-elementary school.

The staff and children at VIM know in intimate ways what it means to trust that God will provide enough. The church where I preached that night – with a spotty (but LOUD) sound system, florescent lights, and a part-time pastor – knew what it meant to trust that God would provide enough.

What may have surprised the Mayans in the congregation who heard my sermon in March is that us visitors from North Carolina – who obviously had enough to afford a ticket to fly to Mexico and take off of work for a week – we were the ones who needed some help learning to trust that God would provide.

I read an article in the Observer this week that highlighted – once again – the growing income disparity in Charlotte. This is a problem that some smart people are working hard to address – and we should pray for our leaders...including some in this congregation...who are working to seek solutions and strategies that would unlock more economic opportunities for Charlotteans of all backgrounds.

The article I read held up the Plaza Midwood and Belmont neighborhoods as a case-in-point illustration of the problem. Plaza Midwood and Belmont are adjacent to one another, separated by Hawthorne Lane. Belmont is in the bottom 10% of the nation in socioeconomic statistics. Plaza Midwood is in the top 10%.

I know that there are lots of historical and sociological reasons for this kind of income inequality. I am aware that the way forward is complicated. But from a theological standpoint, it strikes me that one contributor to the problem is that Belmont and Plaza Midwood are made up of the same kind of people that live in the neighborhoods where the rest of us live: people who worry about whether or not there will be enough.

It doesn't matter where you live or what tax-bracket you occupy – we all struggle with that question: will there be enough? And when we struggle with that question, it becomes difficult to see past what we don't have to recognize what we do.

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In as much as I have made fun of the disciples for completely forgetting the amazing ways Jesus had provided for a hungry crowd – I can understand their amnesia.

How often have I prayed for God to provide – and then received a blessing – and then worried about whether God would provide?

Does that sound familiar?

Maybe what we need are some more miracles.

I bet we could all come up with a pretty good list of communities, countries, families, friends – who could stand for Jesus to perform another few miracles of multiplying the loaves and fish. If he can do 4,000 and 5,000 – why not 10,000? Or 3.8 million? That's how many households there are in our country with hungry children in them – 3.8 million¹.

Maybe that's what we should do – just pray harder for Jesus to show up and perform more miracles.

But before we delegate all of these problems to Jesus, let's take a look at how Jesus went about providing for what those hungry crowds needed.

I am not one to diminish the power of God to do things that are beyond our comprehension – but it seems to me that the miracle of these feeding stories is not found in Jesus performing a magic trick with loaves and fish.

¹ http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/us_hunger_facts.htm

In both cases – what does Jesus do when faced with a hungry crowd and his disciples doubt about whether or not there would be enough?

He tells his disciples to find the resources from within the community.

“Where are we going to find what we need, Jesus?”

“Let’s start with what you have...” he replies.

How will Jesus provide for those gathered in the crowds?

Not by sending them away to the marketplace to fend for themselves.

Not by wringing his hands because the need feels overwhelming.

But by encouraging the people of God to share what God has already given.

In the face of their worry that there will not be enough Jesus challenges the disciples to trust that the needed resources will appear in the midst of communal activity that is gratefully focused on God’s generosity².

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We often think about the familiar story of the feeding of the multitudes as it relates to money – and my guess is that you have heard more than one sermon on this passage in the midst of the fall stewardship season.

But as Christ’s disciples – God calls us to do much more than share what we have in order to provide a ministry budget for the church. That’s important, mind you. But there is more.

It goes beyond economic resources.

Do we have enough humility to honor those with whom we disagree?

Do we have enough patience to abide with our neighbors?

Do we have enough passion to work for change that feels out of reach?

Do we have enough faith to believe that God is – even now – making all things new?

Where are we going to find what we need, Jesus?

Just look around you – Jesus says...

Behold the miracle of what I provide.

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² With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Cam Murchison, whose work on this passage help shape my interpretation.

