

Food for the Hungry

Matthew 14:13-21

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Now 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. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

When 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." 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. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Matthew 14:13-21

When Matthew wrote his gospel, he didn't put in any subject titles. Neither did any of the gospel writers. But now most Bibles have added titles to help us find things we're looking for. In my Bible, the title of this section of Matthew is "Feeding the Five Thousand." But that's is not accurate. Here's what the text actually says, "And those who ate were about 5,000 men, besides women and children." Matthew is the only gospel writer who adds those last words, "besides women and children." So, how many would that be? Did most men come with their wives? That would mean at least ten thousand adults. If each family had two children, that would bring the total to 20,000 or more if they had large families. Of course, we'll never know the exact number.

So, we can't blame Matthew for rounding off the total to five thousand men, besides women and children. As this story begins, Jesus has gone off by boat to a deserted place after hearing that his cousin John the Baptist had been killed. He wanted to be alone. But, when people heard that Jesus left by boat, they hurried around the lake on foot. When Jesus got to shore, his solitude was gone.

But he didn't get back in the boat and turn around. He had compassion on the crowd, curing the sick who came to him. As the sun sank lower in the sky, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and it's getting late. Send the crowd away so they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

That seemed like a thoughtful and realistic suggestion, but Jesus had a different idea. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Are you kidding? The disciples knew they couldn't feed all these men, besides the women and children! Maybe they had brought just enough for their group - five loaves and two fish. "Bring what you have to me," Jesus said. Then he told the people to sit down. He didn't ask for validation of income. He didn't ask the men if they were working. He didn't scold the women if they had too many children. He didn't ask if they were from Galilee or if they were foreigners. Isn't that just like Jesus? His only standard was need. They were hungry.

Later in Matthew Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food." But the blessed ones were shocked and asked him, "When did we see you hungry and feed you?" Jesus replied, "As you did it to the least of these who are part of my family, you did it to me."

Jesus wanted his disciples to see the crowd as family. "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They must have stood there with their mouths open. "We have nothing here," they said - but that wasn't the end of their sentence. "We have nothing here...except five loaves and two fish." And it turned out to be enough.

I've had a really hard time with this sermon. Even though I've preached on this gospel many times, this story seems more urgent this year. I keep hearing Jesus turn to me and say, "They need not go away, Cynthia. You give them something to eat."

The need is great every year. Packing the Thanksgiving bags for the Ritter Center for individuals and families has become an important part of our annual rhythm. We want people to have enough food to eat. We want there to be food on the table on Thanksgiving and every night.

With the coronavirus pandemic, job loss and economic recession, so many more people are food insecure. The numbers are staggering. 2X as many people are going to the Marin County food bank than before the pandemic.

Seeing those huge numbers, we may feel like the disciples: there's nothing we can do; but, like those disciples, I do have something rather than nothing and so do you. We are giving food and money to fill 50 bags of groceries for the Ritter Center. Thank you. I miss doing it together this year. And we are supporting the Street Chaplaincy and their burrito ministry feeding 30 – 70 people every Tuesday night with a hot meal.

We support longer term organizations like Bread for the World as we write letters to support legislation for policy to support food aid and projects that lift people out of poverty.

Art Simon, the founder of Bread for the World, often said that work to end hunger walks on two legs: assistance and advocacy.

Ending hunger is personal. It's also political, but most of all, it is holy work. Jesus prayed that God would bless the food in his hands so it would be enough for all these hungry people. But he didn't pray until after he said to the disciples, "...you give them something to eat."

Then, after praying, Jesus gave the broken bread and the fish to his disciples. They didn't argue and say this is preposterous. They didn't laugh at this ridiculous assignment. They took those broken pieces and started passing them out. They must have wondered how long the food in their hands would last, but they just kept going. And when everyone had eaten, there were twelve baskets left over.

What does this story look like this year? Churches and faith communities saying to their neighbors - "We don't want you to go hungry. Please come and take what you need."

Close with a story from my friend Pam. This is a story from two weeks ago at the food pantry at First Presbyterian Church in Orange, CA.

We opened early yesterday and there was a man 5th in line. I didn't recognize him (I'm getting to know the "regulars"). I went out to talk to him and ask him the questions we need for our monthly reports. Family of five. Mom, dad, three boys under 17. Caucasian from Irvine. I asked if he'd been here before. No, this is his first time.

I explained our process. We'll give you a box of nonperishables and there is a lot of food out on the table, produce and other items. Take what you need. Then I have a list of other produce and dairy we will pack for you. He asked for every item on the list.

I started going down the list...do you want eggs?...milk?...orange juice?...he could hardly talk. He was choking back tears.

While the volunteer was filling up his bag, he was packing up food out on the table outside. I went out and asked, "you said you have three sons, could you use two gallons of milk and two dozen eggs?" He looked relieved and said yes.

I took his "order" out to him and gave him another bag of nonperishables that we had packed for Sunday's distribution. I told him we had toiletries and household items and he could choose two. He looked at me and said, "you know, I'm a little overwhelmed here. Can I go put this in my car and come back?"

When he came back, I said he could choose his extra items. He ended up leaving with shampoo and laundry detergent and I made sure he knew he could come back on Sunday.

He must have thanked us ten times. My guess is that he had held out as long as possible. The "stimulus" payments ran out. Unemployment is almost expired. Savings has probably been depleted and he finally put aside his pride. I don't know his story, but I know our

interaction. God bless him and his family and all the other families in similar circumstances.

I can't get him out of my head. It shouldn't be this way. (1)

Jesus turns to us with the same calling: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

May these bags of food that will be filled and shared with people in our community be a blessing.

May we notice the food on our tables today, on Thanksgiving and every day and remember what it means to savor food and share food. Amen.

1) Pam Reed Presnall, First Presbyterian Church, Orange, CA posted on Facebook 11/5/2020