

Topic: The Feeding of the Five Thousand
Title: Overcoming the Paralysis of Analysis

In today's Gospel, we turn from parable to miracle, with Matthew's version of the feeding of the five thousand. Its context begins with Jesus hearing the tragic news that John the Baptist had just been executed by the reigning monarch, Herod Antipas. In his grief, Jesus ***"withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself,"***¹ seeking rest and solitude. Yet the crowds followed him relentlessly, carrying their sickness, their hunger, and their hope into that wilderness. When Jesus stepped ashore and saw them, he was moved with compassion and healed their sick. Then, when evening was approaching, ***"...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.'"***² But Jesus saw something else. He saw a people hungry not only for bread but for life itself, echoing Isaiah's cry: ***"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... come, buy and eat!"*** In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus reveals a God who meets human need with overflowing generosity, turning our "not enough" into abundance. Therefore, he turns to his disciples and says, ***"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."***³

The disciples couldn't believe what they just heard. As they reviewed the staggering needs represented by all these people, they were perplexed, since they had only five loaves and two fish. Yet the phrase ***"You give them something to eat"*** stands out. These six words are at the heart of three of the four Gospel accounts of this same miracle.⁴ Consequently, it deserves particular attention. And for that reason, I want to pause and reflect on a question: How do you find the capacity to

¹ Matthew 14:13b

² Matthew 14:15

³ Matthew 14:16

⁴ See Matthew 14:16, Mark 6:36, Luke 9:13

give, serve, and be centered on others when you are battling your own griefs, trials, and tragedies?

I am the first to admit that what he asks of us is not easy. It seems like every time God calls me to do something that appears beyond my human ability, I tend to struggle with the paralysis of analysis. This state of self-imposed powerlessness seems to occur through the overwhelming whirlwind of thoughts and doubts that surround me. And by the way, that includes the writer's block that I work through each week when I need to come up with another sermon. But, since I am not the only one who struggles with these sorts of things, how do we get unstuck?

We need to start by looking at what little we have and believe that it is enough. And, by the way, that includes you. You are also enough. Paul said it best when he said, ***“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”***⁵

There is a story about a young man, who was about 13 years old at the time, who read about Dr. Albert Schweitzer's missionary work in Africa and wanted to help him. He had enough money to buy one bottle of aspirin. So he wrote to the Air Force and asked if they could fly over Dr. Schweitzer's hospital and drop the bottle down to him. A radio station broadcast the story about this young fellow's concern for helping others. Others responded as well. Eventually, he was flown by the government to Schweitzer's hospital, along with 4 1/2 tons of medical supplies worth \$400,000, freely given by thousands of people. This outpouring of generosity would be the equivalent of millions of dollars today. When Dr. Schweitzer heard the story, he said, “I never thought one child could do so much.”

And here is another story that brings the Gospel a little closer to home. It's about Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology and a motivational speaker. In the 1980s, he was invited to a women's

⁵ Philippians 4:13

conference to give the principal address. These women were challenged to raise several thousand dollars for a mission project. While Campolo sat on the platform, the chairperson turned to him and asked if he would pray for God's blessing as they considered their responses to the challenge. Campolo stood and—to the utter amazement of everyone present—graciously dared to say, “No.” Then he approached the microphone and said,

“You already have all the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room. It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing when, in fact, God has already blessed you with the abundance and the means to achieve this goal. The needed gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible, and accountable stewards that we're called to be as Christian disciples.”⁶ And they did!

This kind of boldness is necessary when we feel paralyzed by the needs that surround us. We, working together as individuals and as a Church, can be blessed, broken, and given to accomplish things beyond our wildest imagination. So let's begin by doing our part, however small it may be, and watch in amazement as God uses it.

Let's Pray: Lord Jesus, feed us with the bread of heaven so that we might have the courage to follow your example as we work, pray, and give to the mission of our church and the needs of the world. Amen.

Reflection and Application Question

- The initial response of the disciples to the needs of the crowd is to send them away. In what ways can you relate to their attitudes and actions? How are you being challenged to believe that God can use you to bless others? How might you begin?

⁶ Citation Lost. This sermon was delivered over 40 years ago.