

Jennifer Warner  
Text: Matthew 14:13-21  
Title: “You give them something to eat”

“You give them something to eat.” Of all the words of Scripture that we have memorized in Sunday School and posted on the walls of our churches, this usually doesn’t make the cut. We prefer other words like, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” or “Cast all your cares upon God.” This is not a sentence we want to dwell on.

However, it turns out to be the focal point of this important story. This story is in all four gospels and in Matthew and Mark, there are two feedings mentioned. One of the feedings takes place in Galilee, presumably with a Jewish crowd. The other feeding is in Gentile territory, in Tyre and Sidon. And though we rarely see it these days, the early church’s image of the Lord’s Table often included bread, wine and *fish*, making a direct reference to this story. The feast for a multitude where everyone was fed and welcomed was central to the early church’s self-understanding.

Walk through the story with me.

This passage opens in a place of deep grief. John the Baptist has been murdered by Herod. Herod got caught in a display of his power and was dared to kill John. He went through with it to protect his own reputation.

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. (v.13)* Jesus withdraws after hearing the news of John the Baptist. We can imagine what he is feeling. He is grieving for his friend, partner in ministry and the Bible says, his cousin. Perhaps, he is withdrawing out of fear and anxiety, seeing what happened to John who shared his message that threatened empire. Jesus may be looking ahead at what waits for him. He takes all of these feelings and looks to be alone in a deserted place.

*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. (v.13-14)* This must have been the last thing he wanted. You don’t go to a deserted place to be followed by a crowd. You go to be alone, to heal, to rest, to listen. But his compassion – his feeling with them – led him to spend the day healing rather than in solitude.

*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.**” (v. 15-16)* Let’s stay here a minute. The disciples don’t know what’s ahead. They are tired. They are probably grieving and afraid as well. They want to rest and they know Jesus needs to rest. Isn’t it the kindest thing to do to send everyone away? Some commentators remind us that there were *rules* for who a Jew eats with and how they eat. How could they manage to stay kosher while feeding such a crowd?

### “You give them something to eat”

Notice what Jesus *doesn’t say*. “Oh, they’re hungry? Well, let me just make some dinner appear and abracadabra, here it is!” Or, he had just cured the sick, it seems an easy task to fill the crowds’ stomachs!

The disciples would have liked a miracle right away, “Okay, instead of sending them away, you’ll take care of it Jesus? Great. . . we’re still off the hook.”

But no, **“You give them something to eat”**

See them turning their heads, looking behind them – there are probably 10,000 people out there! You want US to give them something to eat? We don’t have any food, we can’t guarantee that the meal will follow all the proper dietary laws. We have nothing.

“Nothing?”

Well okay... five loaves and two fish but we were kind of hoping the 13 of us would eat that for dinner.

“Bring them here to me.”

*“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.” (v.19-20)*

The disciples reluctantly pulled out what they had, their own dinner, and handed it to Jesus. Who blessed it... and somehow there was enough for everyone.

The story of this feast became the foundation of the early church as we see in Acts 2:44-47:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The early church lived in radical hospitality and generosity. They refused to make someone else’s hunger the other’s problem or even just God’s problem. No, it’s *our* problem. It’s *my* problem. It’s *your* problem. **“You give them something to eat.”**

In the contemporary church, we face the same temptation as the disciples. Some of want to make the needs of others’ God’s problem. We think God should be the one to swoop in and save in a miraculous act. Until then, there’s nothing we can do. Some of us think it’s up to others. It’s a “God helps those who help themselves” kind of attitude. Some of us are afraid that eating with someone outside of our group is going to make us a little dirty. We are more concerned with keeping ourselves clean than with feeding the hungry.

But none of these are an option in this text. Jesus looks directly at us and says, **“You give them something to eat.”**

This generosity and commitment to a feast for all is the heart of our faith. We see it throughout Scripture as God asks those who think they have nothing, to give what they have. Moses in front of the burning bush didn’t want to go back to Egypt and make the Israelites’ oppression his problem. Rahab was a prostitute. Gideon didn’t have the courage to lead God’s people in battle. Esther was a woman in a man’s world where women didn’t have a voice to speak prophetic justice to a king. Zaccheus was a tax collector. Paul persecuted the church before he was called to share the gospel. But God said to each of them, **“You give them something to eat.”** Bring what you have to me and I will bless it. It is enough.

Like Jesus and his disciples, we are often tired, hungry, sad and afraid. We are nervous about what norms we might break if we live generously. It is in *those* places that Jesus asks us to give what we have even when it feels like nothing. This is very gritty but it is the consistent call of Scripture and the witness of holy women and men throughout history bear witness to the power of this generosity.

**“You give them something to eat.”**

Victor Frankl who survived a concentration camp writes a very poignant story that sweeps away any of our reservations:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number... but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of his freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. (Linn, *Sleeping with Bread*, 44).

These men who truly had nothing—no dignity, no hope, shared the crust of bread that they had and it was multiplied into hope for their fellow prisoners.

**“You give them something to eat.”**

Jesus knew his disciples *did* have something. They *did* have the power to choose to give the little they had. I believe that when the church begins to live like this, when we take what we have and give it to Jesus, God *does* bless. The world’s literal hunger for food and its spiritual hunger for meaning and for love begin to be filled. We begin to see the ancient prophet Isaiah’s words come to pass.

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
(Isaiah 58:6-9)

Imagine how the disciples felt when they saw what they had given – what they said was “nothing” –how it was multiplied and fed thousands. Just like Isaiah said, when we give, we find healing and blessing, not to the exclusion of others but along with them.

You may think you have nothing. Scrounge around in your pockets and through your purse and bring what you find to Jesus and watch him bless it as you start handing it out.

**“You give them something to eat.”**