
YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

How many of you would like me in today's sermon to give you everything you need to know about GOD and JESUS?

- How many would like to receive all the information necessary for being a faithful disciple?
 - Well, there's an old adage attributed to P. T. Barnum that also applies to preaching and Christian ministries and programs: "Always leave them wanting more."
- And the truth is that no sermon can say everything.
 - Worship services can't possibly tease out every imaginable symbol or awaken the full range of human emotions.
 - One of the things I try to do in my preaching is to get you to want to come back next week eager to hear more.

Yet, when JESUS fed the 5000-plus people, HE seems to contradict or at least overlook that wisdom.

- This improvised feast that takes place in what Matthew describes as a "deserted place," nevertheless leaves each member of the crowd stuffed.
 - "They all ate and were satisfied," the Gospel says.
- That's a detail that is often overlooked, especially in our society today that is all too familiar with the practice of eating until our bodies say, "Enough," or "I'm full."
 - But chances are that JESUS' Galilean dinner guests considered being filled an uncommon luxury.

Maybe JESUS didn't leave them wanting more food after they had their fill of bread and fish.

- Still, I suspect that HE did leave them wanting HIM to stick around and do more for them.
 - They must have hoped that there would be a next time, for they would have known that they would grow hungry again soon enough.

Many parts of the Bible celebrate GOD as the source of material sustenance.

- Often, those who seek to do GOD'S will see their mission as solving the social problems that lead to hunger in our city, nation, and world.
- There are so many Christian sponsored efforts that seek to increase economic effectiveness and support programs that work for fair and equal distribution of food.
 - And these ministries are important.
- But when Matthew notes that JESUS had compassion on them, we are reminded that JESUS' actions of healing and feeding reflect HIS concern for basic human needs.
 - To feed another person is to affirm her/his human dignity.
 - When we open the door to someone who needs to use the bathroom, rather than having to find a secluded spot in the bushes to relieve his- or herself, we are acknowledging that person's human dignity.
 - To feed people until they're full as JESUS does is to declare them abounding with value.

Human dignity is always under assault as the recent news reminds us.

- You've heard or read the statistics about how access to affordable housing and healthcare for many millions of Americans is at risk.
- Current and prospective transgendered military personnel are singled out for scorn and rejection on the bases of their gender identity,
 - and not praised because of their courage, commitment, and ability to serve our country.

- Families, neighborhoods, and congregations fear being torn apart by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and policies.
- People's worth to our country is being evaluated on the basis of the language they speak or the color of their skin.

People are wanting more—more than that.

- We want more—more than that.
 - A meal in which the hungry are fed.
 - A banquet to celebrate each person's inherent value as a human being and to not just to be treated as a thing or a project.
 - A seat on the grass alongside the SHEPHERD of our souls—and not just once.

It's simple: what people want is to be completely filled.

- Or as close to that as they can come.
- I think that many who come to be served by a church in worship or in other ways do so because they've been told and firmly believe that there will be enough.
 - Have you ever been to a potluck that ran out of food?
- But deep down, many and maybe we ourselves, quietly and impatiently wonder if that promise is really true.

After all, once JESUS made sure everyone had been fed, HE dismissed them and then HE headed for the hills alone.

- And there is nothing that tells us and there is no reason to believe that those people got another meal of such magnitude.

So, does the Gospel simply pronounce us fed,

- or does it continually feed us?

Does GOD simply declare our dignity and worth and move on,

- or has GOD put people, communities, and values in place in order to claim and secure this dignity perpetually?

Jack Nicholson's distraught character Melvin Udall in the film As Good As it Gets, names this concern for us.

- Melvin, reflecting upon our lives marked by brokenness, frustrated expectations, abuse because of differences, and other dissatisfactions, asks, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

What if JESUS' miraculous feeding,

- what if GOD'S endorsement of human dignity and value,
- and what if our hope for fulfillment all serve only to show us what we lack?
 - What if they only make us realize how far we have to go or how helpless we are in our current moment?
 - What if they make us feel like we are settling for too little in the face of a biblical text that stirs our longings for maximum satisfaction?

The disciples upon seeing the crowds ask JESUS to send them away.

- Their request is not malicious.
 - They simply are aware of their location, the time of day, and the limitations of their resources.
 - So, they are shocked when JESUS tells them to give the crowd something to eat.

This miracle demonstrates a number of things that can help to answer our concerns.

First, JESUS doesn't send the crowd away.

- JESUS sees them as the guests of HIMSELF and HIS followers, and provides them what any good host would.

Second, JESUS attends to the physical needs of the people, not just their spiritual needs, and HE does so without even asking if they believe.

- JESUS simply heals their illnesses and fills their bellies.

Third, JESUS physically illustrates the parable of the mustard seed.

- Five dinner rolls and two sardines—certainly a small morsel for such a large crowd—yet in the Kingdom of Heaven becomes a plentiful harvest.

JESUS attends to the physical needs of the people by sending HIS followers and blessing their small offerings to accomplish great things.

- When we look at the difficulties around us and in this world, it may seem to us overwhelming and hopeless.
 - Yet JESUS says, “You give them something to eat. You get in there with whatever gifts you have, and you trust that I will multiply them so that great things will be accomplished.”

JESUS has told HIS followers to love one another.

- Another word for that love is compassion.

An important verse for us to remember is, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

- This verse suggests empathy for others—understanding that their desires to be happy and well are no different from our own.
 - Our actions toward helping them achieve those desires, though, are more than empathy—they are compassion.

If you see a person who is being crushed by a rock, empathy would say, “Get under the rock and feel crushed as they are.”

- Compassion says rather, “Help to remove the rock.”

When JESUS says to HIS followers, “You feed them,” HE is expanding GOD’S value for human beings by saying, “Feed them as you would want to be fed.”

- Show them their value by feeding them.
- Claim your own values and purpose by serving them.

The modern world is suspicious of compassion because we have accepted the belief that we are fundamentally competing against everyone and everything.

- Thus, compassion is a self-defeating folly of the weak.
- We fear compassion because we don't want to be confronted with suffering, vulnerability, and helplessness,
 - and we fear that we will be taken advantage of.

You've most likely heard the new pejorative “Karen.”

- I don't like to use the term, but a “Karen” is generally understood to be an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman
 - who uses her privilege to get her way or to police other people's behaviors.

- Examples include a white woman who called the police on a black man in Central Park because he asked her to leash her dog in an area that was clearly marked as required.
- Or the woman who, with her husband, called the police on her neighbor for writing "Black Lives Matter" with chalk on his own property.
- Or the woman who called the police on some black men using the public charcoal grill in a park for their barbecue.

We're seeing an increase in folks who feel entitled and who seem not to care about anyone else but themselves.

- This attitude stands in opposition to compassion.
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JESUS saw the crowds and had compassion for them.

- And HE sent and sends HIS followers to do the same with two small fish and five tiny loaves of bread.
 - JESUS knows that we do not have enough to complete the tasks that we take on—on our own anyway—so JESUS tells us to trust HIM.
 - JESUS knows that in our serving, we will find faith and fulfillment.
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When we bring our bags of pasta or cans of tomato sauce, we know that this will not solve the hunger that exists in the world,

- But we trust that GOD will use it to make a difference.

When we offer our gifts to Lutheran World Relief or Lutheran Disaster Response, we are aware how great is the need

- and how small our gifts seem by comparison.
 - But we believe in a GOD who calls others here and throughout the world to act and to offer what we can together,
 - so that GOD can multiply it and meet the needs of multitudes.
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This is how GOD addresses the needs of the world—through the small actions of believers.

- You may not be able to do all that the world needs, but the world needs all that you can do.
 - "So, you," JESUS says, "give them something to eat."