

Feasting and Fasting: You Do It!

Luke 9:10-17, 3-31-19

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 31, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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¹⁰ On their return the apostles told Jesus^[c] all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. ¹¹ When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.



¹² The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.” ¹³ But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” ¹⁴ For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” ¹⁵ They did so and made them all sit down. ¹⁶ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. ¹⁷ And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

Here is one of Jesus most well-known miracles. The feeding of the 5000. This story is one of the few that appears in all four gospels. In fact, this story, or some

version thereof, appears six times in the gospels. In Matthew and Mark there is the feeding of the five thousand, and then later the feeding of the four thousand. So when a story appears six times in four gospels, it certainly should make us sit up and take notice. And for good reason. This story holds significance in our lives of faith. This story both looks back and looks forward. In the miraculous feeding, you can hear the echoes of ancient Israel – like the words from Exodus “Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day”. You can hear echoes of the prophet Elisha, from second Kings “But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’”⁴⁴ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord”. These stories of God providing food miraculously to a hungry people would have been immediately familiar to any Jews reading the gospels in the first century, and this feeding connects Jesus to Moses and Elisha, who brought the law and who prophesied for God.

Not only does this miracle bring Jesus closer to the patriarchs of the faith, but it also points towards a tradition that serves as one of the foundations of Christian worship. The words are there – “took the bread” “blessed the bread” “broke the bread”. These words remind us immediately of the last supper, and the sacrament of communion. In this miracle, we become connected to our roots, even as we are reminded of the new covenant sealed by Jesus Christ. Not only do we recognize communion in this miracle, but it helps inform how we can live out that communion. In light of this story, the sacrament of communion becomes a demonstration of God’s wide table and broad mercy, and desire to feed all the people. This is a crowd that interrupted him after he withdrew with his disciples. This is a crowd that barged in to his time with his disciples. They had just

returned from being sent out into the world to spread the word of Jesus ministry. Jesus brought them to that private place to learn what they had done, and then a huge crowd showed up; five thousand men, which indicates that it was more than five thousand when all the women and children were counted.

I'm often very hard on the disciples. Usually in these stories, the disciples lose sight of who they are following, or miss the mark entirely. In this case, their only concern was for the crowd that had gathered. It was getting late, and there wasn't food. But the crowd was not going to leave until Jesus was done with them, and they knew it. So they asked Jesus to send them away, not out of irritation at being interrupted, but out of compassion for the people who would soon be hungry. And to me, this is the most interesting part of the story. What is Jesus response? You give them something to eat. This is not what we usually expect from Jesus, right? Compassionate, loving, giving, caring Jesus, who healed and gave of himself even to death. "you give them something to eat". You do it, you take care of it, you deal with this problem. But, remember, this is right after the disciples returned from being sent out. Chapter nine of Luke starts like this "Then Jesus^[a] called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal". Maybe what Jesus is doing here isn't just passing the buck, but reinforcing his disciples' ability to do ministry of their own. But they still don't feel equipped, so Jesus steps in and blesses the bread, breaks it, and hands it to the disciples to circulate around the crowd.

One interesting interpretation that I've heard of this passage is that this is not actually an example of a miracle, but rather an example of Jesus leading his followers to become more generous with what they had. In this interpretation Jesus never actually multiplied the food. Instead, the crowd was there, divided into groups of fifty, and as the meager portions of bread came to the group, the

people in the crowd were motivated to share what they had brought with them. In this interpretation, the crowd had the food the whole time, but it was only until they were encouraged to share what they had that they knew they had enough. Because individually, none of them would have thought that it would be possible to feed that many people, but when taken all together, they all were able to eat. In this telling, the miracle of Jesus was that his teachings inspired people to become generous in ways that they would never have thought. In this telling, the miracle is the ways in which the small acts of generosity add up to do the unthinkable.

Is this the definitive interpretation of this passage? I don't know. I really have no way of knowing, and appreciate the Bible's gift of giving us the chance to always hear it fresh. Namibian scholar Paul John Isaak wrote the commentary on Luke in the Africa Bible Commentary. In his commentary on this passage, he eschews any specific interpretation, but expands on the idea of this being a miracle of generosity. He says "Jesus suggests we need to believe that we have the resources to meet those needs – spiritually, emotionally, economically, culturally and politically. To put it differently, in Africa, you do not just walk past people building a hut, you stop and contribute by tying a twig or two". He continues by saying "when we are willing to share our resources, God will invariably provide our daily bread". That's one way of looking at this passage that encourages all of us to recognize the resources that we have at our disposal, while also looking to God for help and providence. This interpretation seeks to find a middle ground, that we have what we need, but we also rely on God. Like when we pray to God to give us the strength to face another difficult day, when we pray to God to give us patience with our enemies, when we pray that we be made an instrument of God's peace.

But the world is so big. It is so unfathomably big. And we are so small. Just one individual amongst billions. But one person can make a difference. The prime example of this is Jesus, who was just one man, but whose influence and legacy has shaped the entire world, has created cultures and formed generations. But individuals can shape cultures, can affect how others behave, can inspire others to commit to similar behaviors. I remember a time in college. I was on my way to class and when I got there I saw a classmate sitting outside of the room, waiting for the professor. I sat down with this person and as we were chatting other people came and sat with us. Eventually, our whole class was assembled. We were starting to worry about our professor, it wasn't like him to be late. So we got onto our emails to make sure that our professor was ok, that he wasn't sick. Then the classroom door opened and the professor looked at us dumbfounded and said "why aren't you coming inside"? You see, if that first person had just thought to try opening the door, then we would have known, but because of their example, none of us thought to try to open the door either. One person can truly make a difference.

And it happens in positive ways as well. I've been honored to be witness and participant with the Creation Care at Covenant team. A group of dedicated members of this community who have been working to make Covenant the most environmentally friendly place that we can be. Maybe you've noticed that over the past few months there have been more recycle bins around the church. Maybe you've noticed that in Bradfield hall we've switched to using cream in a pitcher rather than in individual cups. Maybe you've noticed the adult education classes that help to teach about environmental stewardship. The actions that the Creation Care team has taken will not change the world. Individually, changing our creamer distribution method will not solve climate change; will not fix the problems that face us. But it's a start. If we start thinking more critically about

the ways in which we consume products and plastics here at Covenant, then there's a chance that people will start thinking about it more critically at home, or at their schools, or at their office. All of a sudden, instead of one church doing something small, it becomes a whole bunch of people, sharing what they've learned, showing the world how to make change. None of this starts without the dedication and small actions of the people here working to make the world healthier.

These small actions are important; essential even. We heard Paul John Isaac talk about the importance of small changes and the ways in which those small changes accumulate. In reading further about him, I learned not only does he espouse this view, but he lives it too. In 2013, seven years after he wrote about tying a twig or two onto a hut, he was appointed as the director of elections in Namibia. This man clearly is committed to the importance of how small acts and individuals create change in the world.

Sometimes the small acts of greatness are the reward in and of themselves. We can all point to times when someone has come up to us with a kind word when we are feeling low. While it may seem to be a small action, something like remembering someone's birthday, or congratulating someone on an accomplishment can have a huge impact on someone's day. These little acts take almost no energy from us, and certainly won't go to solve the major woes that our world face, but they can make one person's day better, and that is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. Caring about our neighbor, showing love and compassion can sometimes feel insignificant in the face of the injustice and hatred in the world, but those little acts are what makes the world bearable. Our small acts of kindness and love serve as a beacon to the world that there is another way to live. The small pinpricks of light penetrating a blanket of despair. And as Christians, aren't we called to be the light? These small acts are not so small when you think

about the ways we can illuminate each other and celebrate each other's humanity.

Little things, scraps of bread, dollars donated, kind words spoken, small acts of courage. These are the things on which the Kingdom of God is built. Because Jesus did not come to create change from the top down, but rather from the bottom up. Jesus inspired kindness and generosity in his followers, the kind of kindness that may seem small individually, but can cumulatively move mountains. And we come blessed with the gift of God's presence along the journey. Maybe we can't feed 5000, but we can do what we can, and trust in God to take care of the rest. That trust in God, combined with our dedication to God's kingdom will move mountains surely as a stream made the Grand Canyon.