

The feeding of the 5,000 is probably one of the most familiar stories in the Gospel record. It was the time of the Passover and all the relatives were in town for the holidays. In a sense, it was like our Christmas or Thanksgiving. People came from throughout the country to celebrate the central feast of the entire year. And this particular Passover, there were some curious souls among that throng. They were all abuzz over this Jesus guy. Who was this Jesus who could heal people, make the blind see, the lame walk, and the deaf hear?

After going about teaching and healing most of the day, Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee to spend some “down time” with his disciples on a hillside in the city of Tiberias. Jesus was tired and hungry after teaching all morning. He traveled to the top of the hill and sat down to relax with his disciples when he noticed the crowd had followed him. Frankly, I can imagine Jesus just sort of wishing they’d go home for a while. But he knew that was not to be. As he looked out at the crowd watching them slowly make their way up the hill, he knew he was going to have to engage with them – but how? Jesus turned to Philip and asked him a question: “Hey Philip, how are we going to feed all of these people?” Philip replies, “There’s no way we can feed this crowd! Two hundred days’ wages would not buy enough for them all.”

Philip closes the subject then and there. Andrew on the other hand offers a little hope. Maybe there *is* something they can do. True, there’s no way they can *buy* what they need, but Andrew, unlike Philip, doesn’t simply throw his hands up and surrender. He takes into account what they *do* have. “There’s a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they among so many?” I can picture the gleam in Jesus’ eye as he hears Andrew’s answer. Philip’s answer was, “There is no way we can do anything.” Andrew’s answer was, “Well this is what we have, how can we do something with it?” Jesus is now going to show them what he can do with what “little” they have.

Notice what Jesus does. First he organizes them. He tells the disciples to have the crowd sit down. The Synoptics give us the detail that he asked them to sit down in groups of 50 and 100. Do you see the beauty of his organization? Think of the problems he eliminated with that command. Have you heard stories before of people standing in line to buy tickets and they are so afraid there won’t be enough that pushing and shoving begins? Do you realize how hard it is to push and shove for food or anything when you are sitting down? I wouldn’t be surprised if the disciples each had certain groups they were responsible for. Jesus knew *exactly* what he was doing.

What does Jesus do next? He doesn't focus on what they *didn't* have. He took what little they *had*, thanked God for it, blessed it, divided it among the disciples and sent them out to feed the people. The feeding of the 5,000 is one of many stories in both the Old and New Testaments where something small was given over to God and blessed, and whether it be loaves and fish, or time in a day, or oil in a lamp, or oil in a jar, God blessed it and provided something great from it.

Jesus was the ultimate economizer. After the meal was over, he didn't let the leftover food go to waste lying all over the ground as trash. He sent the disciples to each of their groups to gather up the leftovers. Twelve baskets were collected. I've always wondered what they did with the 12 baskets. Did they eat it for dinner? Give it back to the boy? Give it to the beggars in the next town they visited?

Jesus took what little they had, thanked God for it, blessed it, and gathered in the abundance of their remains. You know one of the fascinating things about Jesus is that he remains very much alive. Jesus is *still* organizing, God is *still* blessing, and the Holy Spirit is *still* acting in lives of people today.

This passage challenges our church today. Can we stop being Philip, complaining about what little we have, and therefore what little we can do with it – and can we instead be like Andrew, trusting in Jesus to make what we *do* have accomplish something? God knows not only what our needs, wants, and desires are, but also the needs, wants, and desires of those within our church's reach. And if we can but trust God, God will bring those two together. We'll *do* what those we can reach *need*.

The test question for our church is, "How will the physical and spiritual bread of life be given so that people not just *inside* but *outside* the church will be able to eat?" How will we answer Jesus? "Lord, we don't have many thousands of dollars to spend to provide for all the ministries that are needed," or "Lord, I freely offer to you the gift of what I *do* have. I offer my writing, teaching, crafting, computing, carpentry, taking care of kids, visiting, talking on the phone, praying, building, gardening, typing, etc." We can organize the gifts we have to give, and we can acknowledge that *everyone* has at least *one* gift to offer. We can ask God's blessing on those gifts that we have and then go out to accomplish our mission. If we can set aside our mistrust, our doubt in God's power, we will see for ourselves that miracles *still* occur. And here's the kicker: *after* the need is met we will realize the abundance of gifts and talents ready for our *next* ministry. God wants us to take the step in faith to allow God to use the "small" things in our lives to do great ministry. Are you ready?