

## **Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist**

### **Matthew 14:13-21**

When Jesus heard about John, He withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by Himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, He had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. That evening His disciples came and said to Him, “This is an isolated place and it’s getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go onto the villages and buy food for themselves.”

But Jesus said to them, “There’s no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.”

They replied, “We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish.”

He said, “Bring them here to me.” He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to His disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

#### **1. Reality**

Charles Swindoll tells a story about a nine-year-old. His name was Danny. He came bursting out of Sunday school like a wild stallion. His eyes were darting in every direction as he tried to locate either mom or dad. Finally, after a quick search, he grabbed his daddy by the leg and yelled, “Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!” His father looked down, smiled, and asked the boy to tell him about it.

“Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was gettin’ closer and closer. So Moses got on his

walkie-talkie and told the Israeli air force to bomb the Egyptians. While that was happening, the Israeli navy built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over it. They made it!”

By now old dad was shocked. “Is THAT the way they taught you the story?”

Danny admitted, “Well, no, not exactly, but if I told you the way they told it to us, you’d never believe it, dad.”

With childlike innocence, Danny put his finger on the pulse of our sophisticated adult world where skepticism reigns supreme. It’s more popular to operate in the black-and-white world of facts...and, of course, to leave no space for the miraculous.

## **2. Miracles**

When we read the story of the feeding of the five thousand, we tend to focus our attention on the question, “Did it really happen?” There have been a number of attempts to “explain” the miracle. One attempt says that the people were so moved by Jesus’ generosity that they brought forth the food they had hidden under their clothes and in their traveling pouches. This way everyone was satisfied.

Another theory says that the story is not really talking about physical hunger but spiritual hunger. When the small amount of food was passed around everyone tore off a minuscule symbolic fragment. In this Jesus is said to have satisfied the thirst of the soul not the stomach.

I think these questions say more about us than they do Jesus. If Jesus is the Messiah, and I believe He is, then there is no question but that He performed miracles, and on a regular basis. The point of the story of the

feeding of the five thousand is not to prove that miracles happen. It just tells us that miracles happen, and we take it on faith.

### **3. Meaning**

What are the implications of this powerful miracle for us as twenty-first century Christians? Numerous questions emerge from this story.

What does it mean to be compassionate like Jesus? Jesus understood his crowd. He knew the needs of those who followed Him. Do we understand the crowds around us? How well do we know the people in our own communities? How would our knowing them help bring healing?

Do we, like Jesus' disciples, look at what resources we have and dismiss them saying they are not enough? Do we approach need with a sense of abundance or scarcity? When confronted with people with great needs, do we hope they will go away, or do we use what we have in order to do what we can to address the need?

Do we sometimes dismiss people and the gifts they bring to ministry? I have heard Christians say that someone is not "good" for a certain church office because of all kinds of imagined reasons. Sometimes the person they are dismissing is simply different from them racially, culturally, or theologically. Such a loss to us, to them, to the church, and to the world.

### **4. Getting Rest**

In today's Gospel reading Jesus experiences what is common to most of us. He is tired, and He is grieving, having just heard about the beheading of his friend and cousin John the Baptist. He must be sick of the crowds. If there were ever a need for some alone time, this is it. He heads to a lonely spot, maybe a favorite place.

When He steps off the boat, there they are. Can't He just catch a few minutes, a half day maybe, when He isn't needed to do something—a day to curl up with a good book and a cup of tea? Why don't these people get a life?

Jesus looks at them, though, and He can't turn away. He turns toward them instead and heals the sick, and then they are hungry and He feeds them—all of them—more than five thousand. This emotionally drained giver finds He has more to give, because the need is great.

After this miracle, Jesus has the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side while He dismissed the crowds. He then went up the mountain by himself to pray. He finally gets the time to be alone.

Sometimes you have to keep giving. There are things that must be done because others are depending on you, and because it is right for you to do them. You can't keep operating that way forever. We can only go on and on for so long before our souls call out to us to stop and wait for a while—to catch our breath—to look around and see where we are and how far we've come and where we are going.

Finding rest and renewal doesn't often come easily. It may be more like a dance between the responsibilities and the peace that both call to us. Like Jesus, we keep searching for the balance.

## **5. Helping Others**

Too often, we think that giving our lives to God is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the altar, saying, "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all to you." But the truth of the matter is that God sends us to the bank and tells us to cash that \$1,000 bill for quarters. And then we go through life giving away twenty-five cents here, fifty cents there, and so on. Instead of watching a ball game, we spend some time visiting a lonely person in a nursing home who

has no family. Instead of sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, we get dressed and go to teach Sunday school. Instead of playing games on the computer, we listen to a friend tell us about her problems, even though we're tired and have problems of our own to deal with.

These are the moments in which the grace of God can work through us to help another human being, to feed the hunger of the heart and spirit. They may not be spectacular miracles, but these are the things we can do to bring meaning and significance to our lives.