

Sermon 7 28&29 18

Wow! We've got a double header in our gospel today!

Feeding the 5000 *and* walking on water! Miracles.

Pretty exciting stuff... But I'm going to concentrate on the feeding of the multitude – reported six times in the New Testament. I'm going to concentrate on having enough, feeling satisfied.

In the first century the nation of Israel was living under Roman peace, Pax Romana. Rome conquered Israel, probably not difficult to do since it was such a small nation. This meant that all land was seized and then worked by the former owners, they saw none of the benefits – no produce – no animals. Everything that was produced was sold for the benefit of absentee Roman owners. Rome brought peace, but as a conquered Briton once said of Rome, “They make a desert and call it peace.”

This was the world Jesus was born into. This was a world of virtual slavery in your own country – a world of everyday starvation. So you can see how impressive the feeding of 5000 people at a time would be. People were literally starving, and along comes this guy... and he can multiply food! (And he actually would have fed more than 5000 because they would have counted only the men!)

The feeding of the 5,000 is found in all four gospels. *And* there are two stories of the feeding of 4,000 as well – one from Matthew and the other from Mark. Our feeding of the multitude today is from John.

There are those scholars who maintain that 4000 or 5000, it doesn't matter. It's probably all the same story. Others maintain they are different stories – different occasions. What those who compiled the Bible usually did in these cases was give us all the choices and let us make up our own minds about them. There are two creation stories in Genesis, for example.

All these stories about feeding people though -- through all the gospels... They speak of a culture and time that was highly aware of the necessity of food – not as in “fine dining,” but as in fuel to stay alive. Jesus knew what true starvation was – not starvation from going on a diet, but starvation from not enough fuel to live.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens speaks of the Cratchit family's Christmas dinner: “For once, everyone had *enough* – wonderful word, enough.” How wonderful that

word would be for so many in our world today. To have *enough*. I doubt that we here sitting in Pitman USA, can understand, especially not through personal experience, what true starvation is. Jesus fed people who were likely starving.

And yet he did more. Jesus showed concern for a group of people he had probably never personally met. He had no idea whether or not they *deserved* his care. He just cared.

Before the bread and fish were distributed, Jesus thanked God for it. He thanked God so everyone could see him thanking God. He taught them where this miracle and generosity came from.

In Mark, Jesus divided the bread and the fish and specifically charged his disciples with distributing it. He wanted to teach them what it was like to give to others, to strangers. These disciples, illiterate for the most part, ignorant provincials, were walking among 5000 hungry strangers – giving them food, giving them life. Jesus did that deliberately – to teach them and to teach us. He didn't have to do that. He could have worked a miracle and made the food simply appear in front of everyone. But I'm sure walking among 5000 hungry, possibly starving people, giving out food, had an effect on his disciples. Jesus was always instructing his disciples to give because they had received. That's how Jesus teaches us today.

All the people received "as much as they wanted" according to John. According to Matthew "they all ate and were *satisfied*." That's another wonderful word, *satisfied*.

Jesus didn't just meet their needs. He gave them more. Mark tells us that there were "twelve baskets full of broken pieces" left over.

God will meet our limited expectations and go beyond them if we can just learn to bring our selves and what little we have to him. "Little is much when God is in it." That's from an old evangelical hymn. "Little is much when God is in it." We must never believe we don't have enough. We must never function out of our limitations. Whatever we have, whatever we can offer will be enough.

When Jesus asked Philip, "How are we going to do this?" He knew that Philip would figure it out depending on his *own* abilities, working it out in man-hours etc. Jesus wanted to teach Philip to bring God into the equation.

Our Old Testament reading foreshadowed the feeding of the 5000. First, note that the man in the story didn't just offer what he had left over to God. He gave his *first fruits*. He

gave from his first harvest, before he gave to himself, or sold any. That's how he had enough. That's how he had more than enough. He had the faith to know that first we give to God. Then we'll always have enough for ourselves. And it's important to note that there were leftovers in our Old Testament story too.

God will always provide more than we expect. God will always do more than just provide. What do we do with what's left over? How do we value it?

If we come to God in humility, offering our very selves, no matter how little we think we have to offer, no matter how small we think our gifts are, God will do more than we can ask or imagine, as Paul says in Ephesians.

God wants to meet our needs. But that's not all. God wants to show us that we can go beyond our needs to meet the needs of others. God offers us the bounty of love – more than we can ask or imagine.

You know how at Thanksgiving – after the meal – *you feel full*? That's what God wants for us – to feel wonderfully full – spiritually full.

We all know people – perhaps we even feel it ourselves – who are starving – spiritually starving – empty – like there's a yawning chasm within that feels as if it will never feel full.

Some people actually do eat more food – when the empty feeling they feel really has nothing to do with food. But God promises us bread for the journey of life. God promises us *enough*. God promises us fullness. What does it mean to feel spiritually full? I think we often get mixed up. We may think our bodies are starving, but they're not. Our souls are. Bereft and shriveled and starving. That empty feeling is our souls asking for fullness – for faith.

All we need to receive enough is faith. And it's OK to pray for faith – to pray to feel full – to pray to God to fill us up with constant awareness of his love and care.

Again, we can return to the prayer of the father of the possessed boy. "I believe! Help my unbelief!" We can pray that prayer every day – that our starving souls may be filled with God.