

You Feed Them

July 31, 2011 8:30, 9:16 & 10:30 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church

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Text: Matthew 14:13-21
Lancaster, PA

Introduction

You just do not know what a day will bring. We wake up each morning thinking we know what is ahead. We are going to get dressed, eat breakfast, maybe exercise, and then get about our daily work of going to the office or workplace, taking care of our kids or grandchildren, doing our errands and having a typical day. Then something happens. Something happens that changes the whole course of our day, and maybe the entire direction of our lives.

Background

Today we are entering the life of Jesus at a crucial moment. The passage we are studying today comes right in middle of Matthew's account of Jesus. There are twenty eight chapters in all. This is chapter fourteen. Previous to this account, Jesus had sent his disciples out to visit the surrounding towns to preach that God is on the move. As it says in Matthew 10:5-8: *Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge: Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.*

Live generously. That is exactly what the disciples did and God blessed them! Sick people were healed and lives were transformed. People disconnected from God were lead home to the loving embrace God. The disciples returned to Jesus excited! The holy work Jesus had been doing was now happening through them. Then their whole day changed. Just as they were glowing in success of their preaching tour, news came that the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod the regional ruler. In shock, Jesus gets his disciples in the boat so they can be by themselves to grieve and recover. But as life would have it, they would get no such break.

The Text: Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus got the news, he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself. But unsuccessfully—someone saw him and the word got around. Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was. When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick. Toward evening the disciples approached him. "We're out in the country and it's getting late. Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper."

But Jesus said, "There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper."

"All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish," they said.

Jesus said, "Bring them here." Then he had the people sit on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the congregation. They all ate their fill. They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. About five thousand were fed.

What do you do with needy people?

The disciples turn around on the first day of their private retreat to find that they are surrounded by hurting, needy people! Jesus sees this crowd and has compassion. He spends the day healing all who are in need of his touch. As it begins to get dark, the disciples become worried. They are in the middle of nowhere with little resources to feed this now hungry crowd. They tell Jesus, "We are exhausted. Send these people away so we can get a break!" They got a response from Jesus they never could have guessed.

Jesus looks them in the eyes and says, "You feed them. Instead of shifting responsibility to someone else, you figure out a way to serve them." At this point I think the disciples panicked. They did a quick inventory of what food they could find and reported back to Jesus. Among the people they found with a few fish and some bread to share. What did Jesus do at this point? Did he scold them because they were such failures? Did he shame them like Donald Trump because they did not produce the results he wanted? No. Jesus accepted what they could do and then took them to a whole new level.

How to feed the thousands at your door

Listen to what happened here so you and I can learn what to do when the hungry crowds are at our door. When the crowds come, Jesus does not tell his disciples to run away. He tells them to address the issues with the resources they have. They could have gathered the five loaves and two fish gave it to the people closest by and said to the rest, "That is all we have. It is time to go and find your own dinner. Good bye!" Instead, **they brought what they had to Jesus.** Now Jesus is invited to be a part of the solution. He took the food, gave thanks to God, broke it, handed it back to them to distribute, and the seated crowd was amply fed! When we try and help others on our own, our resources will run out. When we come to Jesus and ask him to work in and through us, our resources multiply.

That is what I discovered four years ago. Beverly Harrar and I were asked to be on a task force to help refugees coming to Lancaster. As we would learn, over 300 refugees come to this area each year from very oppressive situations. Just down the street Church World Serve on King Street and Lutheran Refugee Services on Vine Street help international friends every day start new lives in a strange country. We were asked to

join them in finding housing for all these people. I felt overwhelmed, inadequate for the task, and not sure what we should do. So we prayed.

Our group talked, researched, and prayed some more. We found a few people who wanted to help, but housing was in short supply. So we took what we had and offered it to Jesus. A small group in our church began to meet about the needs of refugees. They soon were sponsoring two young men from Bhutan. Over the next two years many of their immediate family joined them. Now there are at least ten family members who we have helped in some way. As that was happening, we started dreaming about to meet the need in a bigger way. If we could get a number of churches to sponsor transitional homes around the city, then there would be lots of places ready to welcome our new friends. This year we launched our first international home of hope or iHope home. When Beverly and Michael left to serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Tanzania this summer, they offered their home to be used to iHope (<https://sites.google.com/site/ihoperefugeehousing/>).

In partnership with St. Matthew's Lutheran Church and Grandview United Methodist Church, we have already welcomed our first family. They are from Burma. The 23 year old son has been in Lancaster for 1 year and already has some connections with other Burmese refugees here. He will be a big help for the family. We are honored to serve this family and we want to do more. We are working to have other churches and groups join us in starting more homes. We want to see our resources be multiplied even more!

Feeding the thousands at your door today

Our church is at an exciting season of ministry! More mission minded groups are springing up in our church. We already have had strong groups working locally through caring in the city, in Honduras, and in Kenya. Now we have iHope and Pipeline (a group committed to support Michael and Beverly Harrar while they are serving in Tanzania). There is also a group beginning to meet around the needs of prisoners and those recently released from our state and county prisons.

What will God have us do next? I am not sure. I am very clear, however on our process. Whatever God brings our way individually or as a body, we need to:

1) Admit we are inadequate; 2) remember God is adequate; 3) offer what you have; 4) give thanks to God; 5) release your resources; and 6) watch Jesus work miracles.